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This article is meant as a "canned" article – one that you may use verbatim in your newsletters. Please credit PenSPRA. This article is the second in a planned series of three articles on school choice.

Charter and Voucher Catch-Up; What's the Score?

In our first article about cyber schools, charter schools and vouchers, we defined the players and explained the difference between the types of schools. Now we are ready to move on; or to move backwards, really. To fully understand the issue, we need to discuss why legislators and some advocacy groups are calling for these changes to our public schools. Why do some people believe we need school choice?

The easy answer is that some of our public schools are failing. Test results and graduation rates in some of our schools are unacceptable and as a state we are failing these students. They deserve better. Unfortunately, however, during the debate over school choice the performance of all schools has become very unclear. In order to make the best decision about how to improve our schools, it is important to understand the current performance of both the public and charter schools.

Let's begin with our public schools. There are 501 school districts in the state of Pennsylvania. You can click on this link to see more detailed information about your district.

http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania_department_of_education/7237

Here are some additional facts about the performance of Pennsylvania's public schools:

- Currently 463 PA districts, or 89%, are making Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Law.
- Pennsylvania students have made eight straight years of improvements in math and reading.
- Approximately 75% of Pennsylvania students are now on grade level based on the PSSA scores in math and reading, and 78% statewide are graduating.
- The *Quality Counts* report ranks PA at 7th in the nation for K-12 achievement.
- The number of Pennsylvania public high school students taking and testing in an Advanced Placement course continues to increase each year.
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Here is some information about the performance of the state's charter schools:

- Currently 66% of Pennsylvania charter school students are making Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Law.
- A 2011 Stanford University/CREDO study found that although charter school students at more than a quarter of the state's charter schools made greater academic gains than their peers at traditional public schools, those at almost half did worse.
- Nationally, a RAND study of charters in 8 states showed no significant improvement in charter school students.

- Another national study by Stanford University/CREDO study looked at charter performance in 15 states and the District of Columbia covering more than 70 percent of the nation's charter school students. It found that only 17% of charters had academic gains better than traditional public schools; 37% were worse and 46% showed no significant difference.

The school choice debate is meant to be answering the question of what can we do to help our students in failing schools. The current legislative answer is suggesting moving a small number of students and their taxpayer funds from failing public schools to charter or private schools. As you review the issue and make your decision on where you stand, the performance of all types of schools should be a factor. From the information above, it seems safe to say that currently charter schools are not outperforming our public schools. Does that make charter schools the right choice?

In the final segment of this three-part series we will cover details of the school choice legislation and offer alternative solutions to improve failing schools.

Eastern Region Workshop November 10th

The Eastern region will meet on Thursday, November 10th at the School District of Cheltenham Township Administration Building from 9 am to 12 pm. The schedule is as follows: Networking and breakfast from 9 to 9:30. Beginning at 9:30, the first session will be a Communications "Show and Tell," or shared experiences for collegial growth. As such, we ask that you come ready to "show and tell" one or two highly effective communication strategies that you have either launched or evolved over the past few years. (ie; website, newsletter, calendar, television programming, advertising campaign...) Share those projects which you may have discontinued (calendars, etc.) and whether you have replaced them with alternative communications. There is a SmartBoard and projector available for your use. If you are willing to share, please email Kristen Rawlings, krawlings@mciu.org or Susan O'Grady at sograd@cheltenham.org to let us know what your topic is. We will create a list of presenters and send out an updated agenda later in October.

The second session is "Alternative Revenue: Communicating the Needs of Your District," led by School District of Cheltenham Township Director of Communications and Development Susan O'Grady. She will discuss her District's recent revival of their Alternative Revenue Committee. Susan will address the perks and challenges of alternative revenue campaigns and touch upon the role that she is currently playing in advancing the SDCT's Alternative Revenue Committee's mission. Finally, Susan will share local alternative revenue trends and open up the floor for a larger discussion of the possible strategies that we as communication officers can utilize to support fiscal vitality within our districts.

Please RSVP to Susan O'Grady at sograd@cheltenham.org by 10/27/11. The address for the workshop is 2000 Ashbourne Road Elkins Park, PA 19027.

The PenSPRA Library

Did you know that PenSPRA has a library of books about communications and public relations? Members can "check out" these books at no cost. Here is a list of the books currently available. If you see one you would like, contact our librarian Jason at davidekj@southbutler.net.

Member Request

Carol Bonnar, Communications Coordinator for the West Allegheny School District, is looking for information on Tip Hotlines. WA has had a Tip Hotline for reporting safety or security concerns for a number of years, which answers 24/7. A staff member takes calls during business hours. Evening and weekend callers may leave a message or choose an option to be connected to the police department if the message is of an urgent nature. If your school district has a tip hotline, what is it called, and how does it function?

Carol also needs to develop a Web page as a drug and alcohol resource for parents. If your district has such a Web page or other type of drug and alcohol resource for parents, she would also appreciate information about it or a link to your Web page. Carol's e-mail address is cbonnar@westasd.org.

Do you need help with an issue? Contact Karen or Nicole for inclusion in e-Comm.

News From Around the State and Nation

Commentary on the lack of academic improvement from vouchers

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-jennings/school-vouchers-no-academic-advantage_b_909735.html

Summary of legislative activity on SB1.

<http://www.psba.org/issues-advocacy/issues-research/vouchers/08312011/status-2011-12-legislative-activity.asp>

Good article on proposed charter school funding changes.

http://articles.philly.com/2011-11-07/news/30369720_1_charter-school-funding-charter-funding-school-districts