

Legislative news dominated by two significant issues: state budget and graduation exams. Most of us have heard about SB 850, Senate Republican's response to the state's budget shortfall. We are all aware of the profound impact this bill would have on education with its "shell-game" approach to misappropriating the federal stimulus funds:

- Eliminate \$317 million one-time grants to school districts to invest in educational improvement strategies and school modernization
- Eliminate \$418 million proposed basic education funding increase that would enable districts to avoid property tax increases while helping to reach the adequate resource levels to meet NCLB requirements
- Create an approximate \$728 million hole in the state's basic education subsidy once the stimulus funds expire – consequently putting the state 1.2 billion dollars behind in our 2008 school funding goals
- Elimination of an additional \$336 million from the Governor's proposed education budget, which includes completely cutting funding for programs proven to work, that KASD successfully utilizes, such as Dual Enrollment and Science: It's Elementary.

Just as an aside, as noted by the nonpartisan PA Budget and Policy Center, SB 850 stood to cut hundreds of programs that affect children, working families, and seniors, including monies for effective newborn screenings, neonatal/obstetric care, emergency mortgage assistance to prevent foreclosures, and long-term nursing home care funds. It has been noted that SB targets those most vulnerable in PA, without approaching the state's 700+million "Rainy day fund" or exploring possible short term tax increases.

On Monday, the House Appropriations Committee defeated SB 850 on a party-line vote of 20-14, Democrats on the committee voted against the bill. But we still don't have a state budget confirmed, and school districts have been essentially preparing their budgets with one arm tied behind their respective backs.

But politics make for strange bedfellows, as this week the Senate approved with a 48-1 vote SB 281, a bill that would halt efforts of the Department of Education and State Board of Education to revise high school graduation requirements and create a new series of assessments called Keystone Exams. Under SB 281, any change in statewide requirements for high school graduation can be established only by an act of the General Assembly. It specifically prohibits PDE from entering into any contract that provides for graduation assessments and prohibits the State Board of Education from creating any regulation to require districts to develop new graduation requirements or implement a model curriculum, diagnostic testing or a new series of assessments unless express authority to do so is given by the General Assembly. As you may recall in mid-May, the state Department of Education recently executed a seven-year, \$201 million contract with a Minnesota firm -- Data Recognition Corp. to develop exams, model curricula, and diagnostic tools, all without legislative review. Noted that this firm also received a

multimillion-dollar contract to update the existing state tests, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. SB 281 will now go to the House for further consideration.

The complex issue of educational standards and accountability is moving apace. A recent poll administered by Susquehanna Polling and Research found the majority of the PA business community in favor of statewide standards; and PA joins approximately 45 other states and D.C. in exploring nationwide “common core” curriculum standards. There are many discussions taking place in all education related hallways, some helpful, some not. I invite my colleagues to join me at PSBA’s Symposium on Education Issues for Board Members - this year’s focus will be on assuring student preparation and readiness. I hope that we can pursue responsible, research-based discussion in this important matter.

Commentary by Tom Gentzel that articulates my perspective on the two issues of budget and graduation exams, for your review: <http://psba.org/news-publications/headlines/details.asp?id=543>