



ISSUE STATEMENTS and QUESTIONS

for the Erie County Association of School Boards

Feb. 10, 2007

Legislative Breakfast

This ECASB Legislative Breakfast is held in partnership with the League of Women Voters, the Western Region PTA, the Erie-Niagara School Superintendents Association, the WNY Association of Secondary School Principals, WNY School Business Officials, the WNY Association of School Personnel Administrators, and the Instructional Development Advisory Board.

Pension Reform

ISSUE STATEMENT:

Pension reform is a topic of great interest to school districts throughout New York State. In addition to the importance of protecting employee retirement benefits earned over long and dedicated careers, school boards and superintendents must be able to predict the district contribution while also advocating for cost control. We understand that our public pension plan is in good financial condition and the plan's continued viability is important to recruiting and retaining top quality administrators, teachers and support staff for our public schools. We also understand that well financed and managed pension plans fuel national, state and our local economies.

With this said, however, and considering the comprehensive oversight of the pension plans, local contributions need to be contained and school districts need to be able to plan for required payments to the retirement systems. One recommendation that focuses on the present, but allows districts to plan for the future, provides districts the ability to create reserves to cover estimated pension cost payments as well as unplanned increases. Another recommendation, specific to decreasing district costs in the future, suggests the creation of a Teachers' and Employees' Retirement System Tier V which would require new members of the pension system to contribute a fair amount for the duration of their employment.

Questions:

What measures do you support to reduce pension costs for school districts (and other local governments), particularly related to newly hired employees?

Do you support giving school districts and BOCES the ability to establish pension contribution reserve funds for all employees?



Health Insurance Costs

ISSUE STATEMENT:

With health insurance premiums increasing in the 10% range in each of the past several years – and premium increases for some coverages expected to increase 20% this year – strategies to rein in costs have been a top collective bargaining goal of school districts. Yet, school districts have had only modest success in achieving health care cost containment by increasing contributions from employees, or increasing deductibles and co-pays, and trying to offer less expensive health care plans.

Attention now is turning to the need to regulate the health insurance industry, where profits are soaring into the billions of dollars. The premise is that car insurance is regulated, casualty insurance is regulated ... should not health insurance also be regulated? To advance that notion to the level of systemic reform, we realize that medical costs themselves also would need to be contained.

Questions:

What reforms are you supporting to contain costs in the health care industry?

What reforms are you supporting to contain premium increases in the health insurance industry?

Charter Schools

ISSUE STATEMENT:

The cap of 100 Charter Schools in New York State has been reached. With the exception of schools in New York City, school districts across the state, and especially in Erie County, have documented that payments to Charter Schools have severely impacted district finances. The negative impact of payments from Erie County School Districts to Charters is predicted to grow each year, even if there are no new charters granted.

However, demand for charter schools across the state continues to grow and the League of Women Voters of NYS recognizes that there is significant pressure on state government to raise the cap. With the intent of minimizing the financial impact of Charter Schools on Traditional Public Schools and increasing the educational achievement of all students in NYS, a summary of The League's newly adopted position on Charter Schools recommends that The Charter School Act be amended in the following ways:

- **Maintain** the current cap of 100 charters with the allowance that Charters that are revoked or are not renewed be available to new Chartering Groups.
- **Introduce** transition assistance dollars to reduce the negative financial impact of payments to Charter Schools on traditional Public Schools.
- **Create** a single entity to grant, oversee, renew, and revoke Charters- with the intent of clarifying the process through which compliance with the financial and academic components of state contracts with Charters are assessed.
- **Support** public funding of independent academic research into the characteristics of Charter Schools that lead to improved educational outcomes- with the emphasis on comparing the academic and social growth of individual students as they progress from grade to grade in both Traditional Public Schools and Charter schools.

Questions:

Now that we know that charter schools have a negative financial impact on traditional public schools and because there is a lack of transparency in the process by which charters are granted, renewed, and revoked – what is your position on maintaining the current cap and why.

Will you support an objective statewide study on the academic and social outcomes of Charter Schools compared to Traditional Public Schools before any change is made to the charter cap?



The Taylor Law

ISSUE STATEMENT:

School districts are under ever increasing pressure to contain costs, yet this proposal handed unions yet another leverage tool ... and left school budgets and school communities vulnerable to whatever manipulative or high pressure tactics might be brought to bear.

Both houses overwhelmingly approved Bill S.3177, to amend the Taylor Law. Although later rejected by the former Gov. Pataki, this amendment would have turned the last union offer into the school district's contract any time the district was found to not have negotiated in good faith.

The amendment set neither definition, parameters, nor context for what constituted "good faith." Nor did it hold unions to any similar standard. So, for example, no matter how outlandish a union proposal, if the district's response was to return to the bargaining table only when a legitimate offer was presented, the union could argue that the Board "failed to negotiate in good faith." If PERB agreed, the union's outlandish offer would have been deemed the contract.

Questions:

Given the profound negative impact this bill would have on school budgets, can we have your assurance that you will not revisit this bill with a new Governor in office?

As it stands now, boards of education are required to resolve negotiation disputes before a binding arbitration panel which is not responsible for paying the award and is not accountable to taxpayers. Is there any interest in the Senate or Assembly in Taylor Law amendments that would level the playing field in the collective bargaining process, thereby protecting school budgets and taxpayers' interests?

Unfunded Mandates ... with Special Attention to Safety in Our Schools

ISSUE STATEMENT:

Gone are the days when we can send our children to school and rest easy they are safe.

A recent article stated that it is more likely for one to be struck by lightning than to be a victim of a fatally violent act in a school. I find that untrue.

I reviewed a copy of the most current timeline of the national school-related deaths, shootings and violent incidents. I found it too unsettling to finish reading, for it was 36 pages, covering just the 2003-2004 school year. The violence and fatalities at Columbine in Littleton, Colorado, and the Amish School in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, have left an endless painful impression on the American people and instilled fear in parents and students alike. New York Public Radio cites NYSED statistics that violent and disruptive incidents increased 50% in 2004-05 in New York State Schools. We have seen multiple incidents of school violence right here in Erie County. The National School Safety and Security Services reports:

September 29, 2000, Buffalo: Two bullets were fired through windows in a first floor pre-kindergarten classroom and a basement kindergarten classroom. Fortunately the bullets hit the ceiling and no one was hurt.

(Continued on next page ...)



(Unfunded Mandates ... continued from previous page)

November 10, 2003, Buffalo:

the fatality of a teenager in the back parking lot at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School. All the students were gone, but a teacher heard the gunshots.

Parents, students, schools and local police departments are teaming up to beat this. SAVE Legislation implemented components for safety plans, training on school violence prevention, character education and fingerprinting of employees. NCLB proposes to create safer schools first by defining “a persistently dangerous school” and offering choice option if: A student attends a persistently dangerous school as determined by the state in consultation with a representative sample of local school districts, or ... Becomes a victim of a violent crime as determined by state law while in or on school grounds of the public elementary or secondary school the student attends

States must certify in writing to the US Secretary of Education that they are in compliance with this provision as a condition of receiving funds under NCLB.

Questions:

Under NCLB, the administration is working with the states to better protect children to define a “persistently dangerous school.” How does New York State define a “persistently dangerous school”?

Would state legislators consider making the following a priority:

Higher aid ratio for BOCES alternative education programs

Additional State Aid to urban schools for alternative education programs

State funding for Family Support Centers

***Our sincere thanks to all legislators and their staff
who participated in this morning’s Legislative Breakfast.***