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Alliance Seeks Increased State Support for School System, Community College

LARGO, MD (January 9, 2007) – The Prince George's Business-Education Alliance today announced a nine-point legislative agenda for the 2007 session of the Maryland General Assembly that calls for full funding of the final year of the Thornton plan, increased spending on school construction and renovation, and greater support for Prince George's Community College. The Alliance also will seek funding for the Geographic Cost of Education Index (GCEI), as well as steps to address the shortage of highly qualified teachers and the impending crisis resulting from the requirement that students pass the Maryland High School Assessments (HSAs) to graduate in 2009.

The Alliance released its agenda at a press briefing this afternoon at Prince George's Community College in which Schools Superintendent John E. Deasy and PGCC President Ronald A. Williams participated. The General Assembly begins its 90-day session tomorrow (Wednesday, January 10) in Annapolis.

The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, known as the Thornton plan, was enacted in 2002, with increases in state aid phased in over six years. The fiscal 2008 budget, which the General Assembly must enact during this session, will include the final and largest boost in funding. The Maryland State Department of Education estimates that state aid to the Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) under mandatory Thornton programs will rise from \$748.3 million this year to \$865.3 million in 2008, a jump of about \$117 million.

Alliance Executive Director David Merkowitz noted that Governor-elect Martin O'Malley and legislative leaders support funding the final year of Thornton. "However," he said, "with the state government facing a projected \$500 million deficit, it will be difficult for them to meet this commitment, as well as to carry out promises made during the campaign to fund the GCEI and increase school construction funding to \$400 million. Along with other groups that support public education, we plan to hold their feet to the fire to ensure that they fulfill those pledges."

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The GCEI, which would target additional funds to school systems in areas with higher operating costs, including Prince George's, was part of the original Bridge to Excellence Act but is not considered mandatory. Governor Robert L. Ehrlich never requested funding for the GCEI and is unlikely to do so in the budget he will submit before leaving office. Governor-elect O'Malley will amend that request not long after he is sworn in on January 17. Full funding of the GCEI would cost the state about \$96 million, with Prince George's receiving about \$29.7 million.

"GCEI funding is essential if the school system hopes to implement the full range of reforms proposed by Superintendent (John E.) Deasy," Merkowitz said. "The proposed PGCCPS budget includes that money, which comes to about \$220 per student."

State spending on school construction and renovation has grown markedly over the past three years and currently stands at \$322.7 million, including \$16 million for bond premiums. An increase to at least \$400 million would help to reduce a severe backlog in projects statewide and compensate for rapidly rising construction costs.

The Alliance agenda also calls on the General Assembly to correct a flaw in the formula that measures the relative wealth of different jurisdictions for purposes of determining levels of state aid. Currently, the formula computes local wealth based on tax returns filed by September 1, reflecting the August 15 deadline used by the federal government and the state of Maryland until last year. In 2005, the federal government changed the deadline for late filing to October 15, and Maryland followed suit. However, the earlier date is specified in the Bridge to Excellence Act. As a result, the state aid formula fails to capture the full wealth of more affluent jurisdictions, whose upper income taxpayers more frequently use extensions for filing their returns.

The Alliance also is supporting a scheduled increase in state aid for Maryland's community colleges. The General Assembly last year approved a boost, phased in over six years, in the so-called Cade Formula, which is pegged to the amount of state support per full-time equivalent (FTE) student allocated to the University of Maryland. Under the change, PGCC would receive almost \$3.2 million in additional state aid in fiscal 2008.

In addition, the Alliance has endorsed full funding of the Maryland Community College Capital Improvement Program budget request of \$127.5 million. The request includes \$6.4 million for four projects at PGCC to create labs and classrooms to support high workforce demand occupations such as nursing and allied health, bioscience, technology, engineering, and teacher education.

With the General Assembly convening for the first time since the November election, Merkowitz called on the governor-elect and legislators to begin planning for issues they will have to take up over the next four years. "The beginning of a term is the perfect opportunity for our elected officials to educate themselves about the continuing deficiencies in Maryland's public schools and develop long-term strategies for addressing them," he stated. "Three areas in particular require attention: the impact of the HSAs, the shortage of highly qualified teachers, and the achievement gaps and funding inequities that will remain once Bridge to Excellence is fully implemented."

State officials anticipate that as many as 25,000 of the 60,000 students due to graduate in 2009 will not receive diplomas because they fail to achieve passing scores on the HSAs. The Alliance wants the General Assembly to establish a task force to recommend policy and funding options to meet the needs of at-risk students, as well as to address issues of truancy, dropouts, and workforce preparation.

The organization also is asking the legislature to "create programs and incentives to ensure that every Maryland student is taught by highly qualified teachers," as required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In addition, it is calling for the General Assembly to begin preparing "Thornton II" legislation that helps public schools respond to NCLB and other mandates imposed since enactment of Bridge to Excellence, revises formulas as needed to ensure equitable funding for all jurisdictions, and creates policies and programs designed to continue Maryland's progress toward providing a high quality education for every child.

The Alliance developed its legislative agenda following consultations with public school and community college leaders and members of the General Assembly. Over the next month, it will meet with the Prince George's House and Senate delegations to promote the agenda and emphasize the support it enjoys from the county's business community.

The Alliance includes leaders of major companies located in Prince George's and affiliated business organizations, as well as the chief executives of the public schools and PGCC. Its goal is to ensure that county students receive an excellent education, from kindergarten through college. The organization conducts research, engages in policy advocacy, and seeks to inform the public about the role and importance of public education.