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Prince George's Non-Profit Adds Momentum to Education Finance Reform Initiative

Team of Organizations Generates Support to Boost Academic Achievement

By Emily Apatov, Staff Writer

In a leap towards meeting educational goals in Maryland, the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance announced last week that it would join the Maryland Coalition for Excellent Schools (MCES), a group that aims to garner support for extra state spending to improve public school education statewide.

The Alliance, the only business group represented in the Coalition, may not appear to be a usual suspect for education finance reform advocacy. David Merkowitz, Executive Director of the Alliance, explains, however, that education is a great concern to business interests in the county.

Prince George's County is expected to add 140,000 jobs by 2030, according to a study by the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University. Merkowitz explains that most of the growth will be in the high-end service sector. Only well-educated people will be able to work in this sector, which includes fields like nursing, information technology, teaching, and biological medicine.

"There's a lot of small business incubation in this county. The question is, where are you going to get these people for those jobs? And you can't do that without an educated labor force."

Merkowitz emphasizes that a school system with a poor reputation has a tremendous negative impact on a county's economy because it discourages people from doing business and relocating to the county.

The Alliance, together with the Coalition, aims to craft an education finance policy that will increase educational attainment by winning funding for students who are in jeopardy of failing the High School Assessment (HSA) tests that the state has mandated as a prerequisite for graduation from high school beginning in 2009.

Bebe Verdery of the Maryland ACLU, a member organization of the Coalition, suggests that the goal of education in the state should not be to "deny diplomas."

“We want students to read and write fluently, and the question is, are there enough resources to make students get the support they need?”

Mark Woodard, the Director of Education for the organization Advocacy for Children and Youth, another member group of the Coalition, explains that this graduation requirement may result in “a serious train wreck” down the line without additional funding to provide special assistance to students. Woodard recommends one-on-one tutoring, mentoring, extended day programs, and for some at-risk students, extended year programs.

Students attending Prince George’s County Public Schools are at unusually high risk for failure to graduate due to the HSA requirement; in 2006, 14 to 25 percent fewer students in Prince George’s county passed each of four HSAs than students passing the tests across the state, on average.

To address the needs of counties like Prince George’s, the legislative agenda of the Coalition was crafted to win approval for full funding for the 2002 Bridge to Excellence in Public School Act, popularly known as the Thornton Plan; \$400 million in funds for school construction from the Governor’s capital budget; and, the creation of a legislative task force to investigate the efficacy of the current policy that requires students to pass HSA as a prerequisite of graduation.

The Thornton Commission which informed the plan held that this funding is necessary to provide public school education systems with the means to meet the constitutional mandate that all students should receive a “thorough and efficient” education.

The Thornton act, adopted by the legislature in 2002, has delivered money to schools for 5 years of the 6-year plan. The legislature approved only \$1.3 billion in funds to be granted by the 2007-2008 school year deadline, however, not the plan’s recommended \$1.8 billion. The Thornton legislation has delivered crucial funds to attract qualified teachers, lower teacher-to-student ratios, and offer programs that pull students out of the classroom for math tutoring and reading assistance.

The plan contains a provision that will appropriate money to Maryland counties, with funding indexed according to the total income of residents in that county and the cost of living in that county.

Joined by Prince George’s County Executive Jack B. Johnson, Schools Superintendent John E. Deasy, and School Board Vice Chair Verjeana M. Jacobs, at the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee hearing this month Merkwitz urged legislators to fully fund this provision, known as the Geographic Cost of Education Index (GCEI). The GCEI provision has not received funding as of 2007.

The pressure to fund the GCEI has generated two competing legislative proposals in Annapolis. Sheila Hixon (D- Dist. 20), Chairman of the of the House Ways and Means Committee, recently introduced House Bill 391, which would begin funding of the GCEI

at 50 percent in fiscal year 2008, phasing in the final portion of funding for the index over four years.

The Alliance supports this proposal over another that was introduced on behalf of the governor by Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Dist. 25), Chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, which would begin funding more slowly. Senate Bill 109 would begin funding in 2009 and phase it in over a 3-year period. Identical legislation has been brought to the floor in the House.

“We want to see full funding as soon as possible,” says Merkowitz. According to the Alliance, failure to fund the GCEI for another year would cost Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS) almost \$30 million in fiscal year 2008. That figure is based on a State Department of Education estimate that assumes funding for the GCEI will be phased in at a rate of 38% of the 2002 amount.

Merkowitz promises that the Alliance will work passionately to add momentum to the fledgling coalition of parents, public school employees, and advocacy groups while voicing the concerns of Prince George’s County residents, adding “a different kind of weight to the argument” for education finance reform.