

How Legislative Reforms Will Transform Schools in Pennsylvania

Jeanne Allen 01 April 2011

Introduction

Pennsylvania is on the brink of a major advance in providing all children with the access they need and deserve to high-quality schools, regardless of zip code. Put simply, school reform is coming to Pennsylvania.

What it will ultimately look like remains to be seen, but today in the Keystone state, lawmakers are closer to sharing a vision of what education for all should look like—closer than they've ever been and closer than most other states' composition and appetite allows.

Embracing Innovation, Competition and Choice

When he was inaugurated on January 18, 2011, Governor Tom Corbett singled out education as the most important approach to improving the state's economic and social fabric as a whole. Recognizing that we must compete with not just other states, "but with students from around our world," Corbett said "we must embrace innovation, competition and choice in our education system."

And consider that the leadership of the Senate within both parties is united in their commitment to increasing full school choice options for the poorest children. The state's Educational Improvement Tax Credit program will go from \$75 million to \$100 million under a plan introduced by Senators Jeffrey Piccola and Anthony Williams. The bill that carries that proposal also creates a brand new scholarship program, one that contains elements of the successful scholarship programs in Florida, Ohio and Milwaukee, which have all seen record achievement improvements since those programs began.

There is also hope that Pennsylvania's charter school law, which today limits the ability of applicants to getting their charter from the school district where they plan to operate unless they appeal to the State Board of Education, would be expanded to include colleges and universities as entities that can sponsor and authorize. Such a program would do two important things to improve schools both for educators and parents. First, it would expand the variety of authorizing in the state. Evidence shows that states with multiple authorizers have three and a half times more charter schools than states with only school board approval. Second, these states are also home to the highest-quality charters, as evidenced by state test scores, numerous credible research studies and ongoing observation.

Around the country, it is clear from the data that an effective teacher can make the biggest difference in

student achievement, after the family. It is clear that when you hold students to high standards, and they and the adults around them face consequences for succeeding or failing, everyone wins and achievement does improve. It is clear that traditional school system structures have become too bureaucratic, too big, too impersonal and too focused on the paper that guides them and not on the people they were created to serve, and that school-based budgets, authority and accountability will be the shape of the schools of the future. And it is clear that unless parents have a say in how and where their children are educated, schools will remain isolated from their customers and beholden to the power not of parents, but of the regulations that bind them.

There is evidence that Governor Corbett wants to address the teacher quality issue head on, including visiting, like many of his colleagues around the country, the subject of tenure and seniority. His new Education Chief Ron Tomalis will no doubt look at the quality of the entry standards to become a teacher in Pennsylvania, as the data show that even the best teacher preparation schools are producing graduates who—while they can master a 10th-grade level Praxis test—are generally lower-achieving students than those who pursue other fields.

A Revolutionary Movement

These pillars of reform—teacher contract reform, standards and accountability, and school choice through

charters, vouchers and virtual models of learning —are here to stay. They will make their way into the Commonwealth sooner or later. These are no longer black and white, rich and poor, or partisan issues. These issues today join the largest and most significantly diverse support base in a century since public schooling in America started. But like Horace Mann's strategy to unite and uniformly educate all children, today's reform movement is revolutionary. It says that today's conditions are different, and indeed they are global, that the "one size fits all" schooling model of yesterday no longer works for the very unhomogeneous offspring we've born and nurtured, that we've passed the point of needing labor unions to protect our teachers from arbitrary and capricious decisions and that the focus must be on students at all times, at all costs. Parents are indeed the first and most important teachers the children will have, and they must not only have the power to make decisions but they must be invited back into the process so they know and learn again how to make those decisions and why they must stay involved, be educated themselves and be healthy.

Can the government really do all this? Well, education was created by laws and it can be reformed by laws. And the citizens of this great state now have people in charge who are less beholden to the special interests of yesterday and resolved to bring their constituents a better tomorrow.

These are controversies worth having, and worth fighting

over, for if this most important of topics—our children—is not worth the battles that must be waged to challenge the status quo and inertia that has plagued their education for too long, what is worth it?

Jeanne Allen has earned national recognition as a fierce advocate for the right of every family to secure equal and better educational opportunities for all children. Jeanne is the Founder and President of The Center for Education Reform (CER), a national advocacy organization based in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area dedicated to creating better educational opportunities for children and families. Additionally, Jeanne is the publisher of *The Media Bullpen*, a dynamic, virtual newsroom that covers the news and the news of education. For more information on education reform and much of the data noted in this article, please visit www.edreform.com.