



News for Immediate Release

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Governor Corbett Outlines Agenda for Education Reform

York – Governor Tom Corbett today outlined his agenda for education reform in Pennsylvania.

“We are set to start work on one of the most important jobs state government can do,” Corbett said, and that is to rearrange our priorities when it comes to education.

“It needs to be: child, parent, teacher... and just in that order,” Corbett said, speaking at the Lincoln Charter School in York.

Joined by Secretary of Education Ron Tomalis and several legislative leaders in education, Corbett listed his top four priorities for school reform in Pennsylvania including: opportunity scholarships, expanding the Educational Improvement Tax Credits program, improved charter school quality and accountability, and more robust and comprehensive educator evaluations.

“We can’t guarantee their success, but we owe all students a fighting chance,” Corbett said. “We’re talking about our children and we owe it to them to reform the system.”

Corbett said his staff worked with legislators over the summer to negotiate reform proposals, receiving support on both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly, but also among constituent groups and communities across Pennsylvania.

These changes, Corbett said, are designed to foster competition in all schools and increase our students’ overall achievement.

Investing in a better educational path for students in at-risk situations will ultimately benefit all Pennsylvanians by potentially reducing future costs in corrections and welfare.

“These are not all new ideas,” Corbett added. “Similar programs for education reforms have already been adopted in other states across the nation.”

The four proposals include:

Opportunity Scholarships:

Opportunity scholarships will provide a choice in education and will rescue children from failing schools. It's also an efficient use of taxpayer dollars by targeting funding toward the student, where it will have the greatest impact, rather than providing more money to institutions that have consistently produced poor academic results.

Students deserve access to educational opportunities that work for them and their learning needs. Pennsylvania has many great schools, but not every school works for every child.

"Some students are consigned to failure because of their ZIP codes," Corbett said. "They live in the shadow of failing public schools they must attend because their families lack the resources or ability to enroll them elsewhere... Opportunity scholarships provide additional choices for Pennsylvania students."

The governor's plan includes:

- An Opportunity Scholarship Program, which would provide tuition assistance for eligible students to attend a public or non-public school of their choice.
- Eligibility for scholarships would be based on income and residence within the attendance zones of the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools across the state.
- By focusing on the worst-performing schools and children in the most at-risk situations, this proposal sends tax dollars to where they can have the greatest impact.
- The proposal ensures accountability by requiring opportunity scholarship recipients to take an assessment to measure academic achievement. The Department of Education will administer the program, including verifying student eligibility and processing of payments.
- Should a child leave their school district to attend another school, the state dollars will "follow" the child.

The Educational Improvement Tax Credit:

For more than a decade, the Educational Improvement Tax Credit, or EITC, has proven to be a successful partnership with businesses, schools and students – helping to give families a choice in their child's education.

The program provides tax credits to businesses that provide funding for scholarships and other educational improvement organizations, as well as academic programs and other benefits to students in all schools, from all socio-economic backgrounds, to pursue educational goals and advanced learning opportunities.

Specifically, the plan calls for:

- An increase to the EITC to provide greater educational opportunities to eligible students from low- and middle-income families beyond the nearly 40,000 students served each year.
- The increased EITC will also provide additional funding to educational improvement organizations that can potentially provide benefits to all schools.
- Program reforms will be proposed along with the increased tax credit.

Charter Schools:

Many quality charter schools have also proven to be a successful educational alternative for the children of Pennsylvania for more than a decade. They offer greater flexibility than traditional public schools, which are often limited by statutory and regulatory requirements.

Specifically, this legislation will:

- Establish a statewide authorization entity to approve, license or and oversee charter schools.
- Make it easier to convert buildings to charter schools.
- Improve the current payment mechanism of charter schools.
- Increase accountability provisions on charter schools to require academic performance and it will require charter school officials to comply with the state's ethics and financial responsibility laws.

Educator Evaluations:

The biggest flaws of the current teacher evaluation system are that it covers only two extreme ends of the teacher performance by offering "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" ratings, providing no useful feedback to allow educators to modify their practices to benefit students.

The most recent reports for the 2009/2010 school year evaluations indicate that 99.4 percent of teachers and 99.2 percent of principals across the state were rated as satisfactory.

It is difficult to understand how nearly 100 percent of teachers and administrators are rated as performing well, Corbett noted, yet the results of the 2011 PSSA show 26 percent of students are performing at or below the basic level in reading, and 23 percent are performing at or below the basic level in math.

Pennsylvania needs a comprehensive method to provide a fair, credible and accurate measure of educators, Corbett said, rather than “a rubber stamp” that allows teachers and administrators to remain in their positions with little true evaluation of effectiveness.

Recognizing this problem, the state Department of Education has received private grant funds to start a voluntary pilot program to improve Pennsylvania’s teacher evaluation tools.

One hundred education entities have already signed up for the voluntary pilot program, including 82 school districts, 10 Career and Technical Centers and 8 Charter Schools.

Specifically, our proposed legislation will build off this pilot program to implement a new statewide method to evaluate teachers, including:

- A new, reliable rating system will be developed to focus on student performance along with traditional observation of classroom practices. Such a system should be the basis for decisions involving merit pay as well as tenure, retention or dismissal of staff.
- Separate rating systems will be developed for teachers, principals and education specialists that will include different measurements and observation tools to help develop a final evaluation for each of them.
- Once all factors are considered, employees will be evaluated as “distinguished,” “proficient,” “needs improvement,” or “failing.”
- The new rating system will provide educators with targeted resources, support and feedback so they can improve their instruction and subsequently, student achievement.

Media contact: Janet Kelley, 717-783-1116

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