

## **RegionWise Newsletter, Issue 9 (May, 1997)**

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PROMOTING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN METROPOLITAN PHILADELPHIA.

### **Center's New Standards in Education Project Gains Momentum**

#### *National and State Context*

In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton said it straightforwardly: raising educational standards has become a matter of “national security.” America is at risk because in the future good wages—to support our consumption-driven economy and our middle-class-based democracy—will be earned only by workers with quality education, technical skills and problem-solving abilities.

This will require “top-down” efforts—such as the cheerleading work of the President, our Governors, and leaders of the nation’s largest corporations, and “bottom-up” efforts—such as those now underway in school districts across Southeastern Pennsylvania.

It will also require full partnership with the nation’s teachers. In his inaugural speech, Bob Chase, President of the National Education Association, argued that while focus on the traditional agenda—salaries, benefits, working conditions—remains important, it is “utterly inadequate” for the future. NEA must become the “champion of quality teaching and quality public schools in the United States.” Either we “revitalize them from within, or they will be dismantled from without.” We are delighted to report that the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) is a full partner in our project, New Standards in Education.

Governor Ridge’s Advisory Commission on Academic Standards is releasing recommendations based on its work studying standards and assessments over the past few months. In developing its recommendations, the Commission looked at a variety of state and national standards, including those of the New Standards project. This work, developed by a host of educators and curriculum experts under the leadership of the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center and the National Center for Education and the Economy, are the only set of thoroughly tested and internationally-benchmarked standards and assessments available. Once the Commission’s recommendations are released, it is likely to be at least 18 months before final State Board adoption of standards and during that time the House and Senate Education Committees will be able to review the proposed standards and suggest changes. After standards are adopted, the Department of Education will revise its state assessments to be consistent with the standards.

### **Center's Work in Pilot Districts**

Since January, 1997, when we last reported on the New Standards Project, the Center has continued its efforts toward promoting the adoption of rigorous academic standards in the original nine school districts in Southeastern Pennsylvania with which we are working.

The nine districts are: Neshaminy and Palisades in Bucks County; Great Valley in Chester County; Radnor, Rose Tree Media, Upper Darby and William Penn in Delaware County, and Hatboro-Horsham and Methacton in Montgomery County. In addition, seven other districts have begun working with the original group—Phoenixville in Chester County; Chester Upland, Springfield, Penn Delco, Interboro and Haverford in Delaware County; and Souderton in Montgomery County.

The Center set up initial meetings with the districts to discover how far along each is in the process of adopting standards-based reform and in which areas districts need assistance. The initial meetings suggest that the Center's role must vary from district to district based on their unique circumstances. For example, the districts are at different stages of implementing reform, and stakeholder (school boards, teachers, administrators, taxpayer, business and parent communities) involvement in and understanding of standards-based reform varies widely.

In several districts, Center staff spoke to school boards, teachers, business groups and community organizations about the need for standards and assessments in education. In particular, we've focused on Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce from around the region to build local coalitions in support of standards. We also recognized the need for more deliberative forums where citizens' concerns about standards and assessments can be candidly addressed. We are working with a skilled facilitator of public deliberations, Dr. Harris Sokoloff, director of the Center for School Study Councils at Penn's Graduate School of Education, to design and conduct these sessions in economically and geographically diverse districts. Forums were held in the Upper Darby, Neshaminy and Great Valley school districts. Dr. Sokoloff is developing an issues guide that will help frame community discussions in all school districts based on these forums.

Some issues that have surfaced so far in districts involved in standards-based reform include:

- How to make a paradigm shift away from the notion that there must be winners and losers in the educational system. With high standards and curricula and assessments designed to help students meet them, all can be winners by demonstrating improvement along a continuum leading to real world standards.
- Why wealthier districts and students performing well under the current system can gain by adopting standards. Parents of current achievers and those from wealthy districts must realize that even the best students in the best schools will not perform well at first on tough, internationally-benchmarked assessments, but that the new academic standards will emphasize skills that are better matched to the needs of a global, technologically advanced economy.
- How teaching and learning will be very different under a standards-based system.
- High performing schools will need to shift to a problem-solving curriculum to help produce future employees who are flexible, adaptable, and quick learners.

Teachers must teach the basics plus help students become critical thinkers, communicators, and team-players whose performance continuously improves over their academic life. For many teachers, this means a dramatic shift in instructional methods and expands their role to include developing curriculum, training colleagues, evaluating practice, monitoring progress, and generally helping to plan the direction of their schools.

### **Thanks to Partners and Supporters of New Standards**

We would also like to thank the 1996-97 foundation and corporate sponsors for their generous support of the New Standards in Education project: Pew Charitable Trusts

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### **MUNICIPALITIES CONFERENCE RECAP**

On Saturday, March 15, 1997, about 200 municipal elected and appointed officials, state legislators, business persons and planning commissioners and staff gathered at the Desmond Hotel Great Valley Conference Center for the second annual Southeastern Pennsylvania Municipalities Conference, organized by the Center for Greater Philadelphia and sponsored by the William Penn Foundation. The group, representing 50 municipalities, looked at ways inter-municipal cooperation can make local government more cost-effective and efficient.

Conferees selected from among three concurrent Issue Forums (Tax Reform, Land Use and Growth Management, and Workforce Development) and from five Best Practices sessions (Insurance, Model Compact Development, Process for Municipal Cooperation, Shared Recreation Services and Transportation Corridor Planning) that offered hands-on examples of inter-municipal cooperation. The Conference concluded with a luncheon featuring a panel of experts who discussed economic and workforce development in metropolitan Philadelphia, state tax issues, and a cooperative approach to regional economic development in metropolitan Phoenix.