



May 7, 2021

Senate Education Committee

Re: PSBA Supports SB 73, SB 351, HB 365, & HB 412

Dear Senator,

On behalf of the 4,500 elected officials who govern the Commonwealth's public school districts, **we are writing to request your support for Senate Bill 73, Senate Bill 351, House Bill 365, and House Bill 412** which are scheduled to be considered by the Senate Education Committee on Monday, May 10th.

Senate Bill 73 (Langerholc) would reinstitute a mandate waiver program, similar to the highly successful program that operated in this state from 2000 to 2010, which would allow public schools in the Commonwealth to apply to the Department of Education for a waiver of many state-imposed mandates to enable those public schools to improve their instructional program or operate in a more effective, efficient, or economical manner. However, under the bill waivers would not be permitted in areas related to health and safety, special education, collective bargaining, and more. School districts seeking a waiver will also be required to submit supporting data or information regarding the benefits expected to be obtained from the waiver.

School districts are required to comply with hundreds of individual mandates imposed by state law and regulations, some of which date back to 1949 and the original passing of the Public School Code. Considered separately, many mandates can be defended as implementing important policy objectives or as necessary to enhance the quality of education, health, safety, accountability, and transparency. However, the combined effect of mandates can become a costly and time-consuming burden, allow little to no flexibility for innovation, and may require compliance with archaic and unnecessary processes and measures that make it difficult to operate a system of education that is truly thorough, efficient, and logical.

Public school leaders fully supported including the temporary mandate waiver program as part of the emergency pandemic legislation in Act 13 of 2020 which received unanimous support in the legislature. However, the waiver provisions in Act 13 were only available for April, May, and June of that year. Public school leaders need a permanent solution that will continue in future years. At a time when school districts across the state are facing many significant impacts brought on by the pandemic, a new mandate waiver program would provide necessary long-term flexibility and cost savings to allow school districts to best meet the needs of their students and communities without necessitating additional state appropriations. PSBA urges you to respond to the appeals of public school leaders across the Commonwealth by supporting this needed legislation.

Senate Bill 351 (Langerholc and Browne) would establish the Community-Engaged Schools for Success Pilot Program under which schools can be designated as a community-engaged school by the Secretary of Education and then develop and implement a community engagement plan which includes an analysis of student performance and student and family needs. The bill includes resources to support a community-engaged school, including grants and technical assistance. The community school model is an innovation supported by PSBA as an evidence-based solution to improving student performance in struggling schools, and it is supported by many providers and groups that implement community school programs across Pennsylvania. PSBA is excited to see that many of our school districts have already begun exploring this concept, and we urge legislators to support efforts to further foster this model in Pennsylvania under this bill.

House Bill 365 (Harkins) would update and correct outdated terminology and phrases in current statute relating to mental health and physical or developmental disabilities which are now antiquated and/or considered disparaging. It is important to ensure that students have a welcoming and inclusive educational experience, and the language in our laws should reflect this as well. PSBA supports this effort.

House Bill 412 (Gleim) would provide much needed flexibility for public schools to help address substitute teacher shortages by allowing individuals holding day-to-day substitute permits to serve as a substitute for more than one educator as long as each assignment does not last more than 20 days, and to allow these individuals to serve in any certificate area. The bill further eliminates the expiration deadline for the substitute teacher program for prospective teachers, thus making this program permanent. Finally, the legislation would extend the time limit each school year that an individual with an inactive certification may be employed as a substitute from 90 days to 180 days. With the difficulty of finding substitute teachers becoming an ever-growing concern for public schools, especially within the context of the current pandemic, PSBA finds these concepts to be very timely and supports this legislation.

PSBA commends Senators Langerholc and Browne and Representatives Harkins and Gleim for their leadership on these issues, and we encourage your support of the legislation.