



PARSS

Pennsylvania
Association of
Rural and
Small
Schools

JUNE 2002

"Quality education for all children of Pennsylvania"

VOL. 16 NO. 3

THE 2002 PARSS ANNUAL MEETING

The PARSS Annual Meeting was held on April 24-26 at the State College Ramada. The 2002 edition of this annual celebration of rural education was, according to our evaluation results, an unqualified success. Our attendance was the highest ever, and the Annual Meeting continued its popularity as a great place for participants and vendors to renew acquaintances, build new relationships, learn something and exchange ideas.

The third annual golf tournament brought together duffers from all over Pennsylvania. A good time was had by all, but Tiger Woods lost no sleep over this one.

Our program emphasized the need for rural kids to have greater postsecondary opportunities, as well as the need for quality pre-school and early education programs.

The gubernatorial race was the subject of Dr. Terry Madonna's presentation, and we had an excellent briefing on legislative matters from the Executive Directors (majority and minority) of both Education Committees.

Our banquet speaker was entrepreneur Andy McKelvey. His McKelvey Foundation is funding college educations for a growing number of deserving rural students, and Andy brought a message of encouragement and hope.

For many of us the highlight of the event were the awards given on Thursday evening. Tom Schmidt was the lead attorney for the law firm of Pepper Hamilton during most of the nine year life of the PARSS equity suit against the Commonwealth. The Distinguished Service Award presented him is a symbol of our respect and regard for Tom and the great work he did for rural schools.

The Rural Educator of the Year Award



Dr. Arnold Hillman, The Rural Educator of the Year

was given this year to Arnie Hillman. While Arnie is still very much part of PARSS, the board wanted to tell him how important he has been, and is, to the purpose and

work of our organization. As a further indication of our gratitude and affection for Arnie, the award itself will be renamed "The Hillman Award".

**Mark your calendars now
for next year's Annual Meeting.
It will be held on
April 24 and 25, 2002.**

NATIONAL RURAL LEADERS MEET

On April 26th Executive Director Joe Bard met in St. Louis with his counterparts from the other states that have rural and small school groups. The meeting was held under the auspices of the National Rural Education Association (NREA).

While a major purpose was to discuss the impact of the new ESEA on rural schools, there was emphasis given to how the different state organizations deal with issues of common interest, such as inequitable funding and the lack of fair access to federal grant monies.

Apart from the benefits of finding out how other farmers plow the same piece of land, a value of these periodic gatherings is to get some sense of how Pennsylvania compares to other states insofar as rural education is concerned. For example; because of the state mandated consolidations of the 1960s, a really small school district in Pennsylvania would have somewhere between 300 to 600 students, and there are not more than a handful of those. 1500 or fewer qualifies a district for small district assistance. In many other states there are lots of districts with 100 students, or less. In these places "one-room schoolhouse" is not an archaic term.

The NREA has new leadership in the person of Bob Mooneyham. Bob is the former Executive Director of the Oklahoma School Board Association, and NREA's headquarters is located on the campus of the University of Oklahoma.

PARSS is interested in the possibility of advancing an agenda of national rural education issues. Believing as we do that it is wiser to hang together than to hang separately, PARSS plans to participate in this process. As NREA accepts individual and institutional memberships, as well as districts, anyone interested in joining should call or write Joe Bard.

JOE BARD SAYS...

There's No Biz Like Control Biz

This is not a plea for local control; it is more of a benediction. I come not to praise local control, but to bury it. It is also not a plea for either its preservation, or a condemnation of the power of the state. It is, rather, a suggestion that we acknowledge the way things really are, and use the information to find ways to better educate children.

The continued existence, or the condition, of local control is still a matter of debate around Pennsylvania. How much control do school boards have over their public schools? How much should they have?

As satisfying, or disquieting as the discussions may be to the participants, I believe that indulging in them is tantamount to closing the barn door after the horse has fled. The assumption of the dominant role in policy making for public education began transferring to state government many years ago, although the pace has increased markedly in the last decade.

The beginnings of public education in Pennsylvania were based on the desire of

communities to see that children had the opportunity to learn to read and write, and to acquire a trade or skill. As documented in the PARSS monograph, *The History of School Funding in Pennsylvania: 1692-2001*, the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 focused those efforts on the poor. The establishment of common schools, school boards and some level of state funding began in the first half of the 19th century. I'm not sure to what extent the idea of control was on anyone's mind at that time, but given the slowness and difficulty of communications and travel, there was no effective alternative to having the schools run by the people in the cities, towns and villages where they were located.

The Constitution of 1874 introduced the language and the concept that, "The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public schools". That language was adopted and further imbedded in state law by the Constitution of 1968. This established the legislature as, in the words of former Secretary of Education Donald Carroll, "the super school board". Since that time whatever control local school boards have exerted has been at the pleasure of state government.

Generally the division of labor has been that the state tells school districts what to teach and provides some money, while the local board's province has been how it is to be taught, and to provide most of the money. The assumption being that citizens of a community know how the children of that community should be educated. A major role of early boards was to act as school visitors, it being believed that local people care most about whether and how well children are learning.

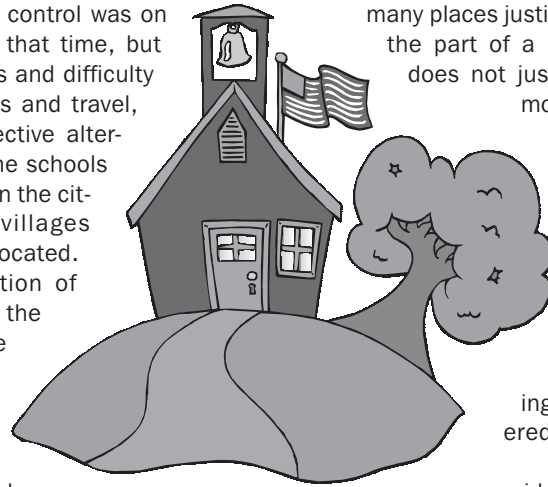
This arrangement held until those with an agenda for education that depended on it becoming much less "public" i.e. vouchers, charter schools, privatized administration, tax credits and so on, came to power in the state and were able to implement much of that agenda by state law. What began as specific hostility in reaction to the unionization of teachers, devolved into a general hostility to everyone involved in the operation of public schools, including school boards. Or to use the favorite term of the reactionaries who believe that those who

know the least about education can govern it best, "the education establishment" (meaning anyone involved in public education who knows what they are doing).

The full extent of the power the state can exert on school districts, is shown in the legislation passed in 2000 that allows for the takeover of districts deemed to have failed academically. Well, that can be exerted on poor school districts, at any rate. While the quality of education in many places justifies some action on the part of a higher authority, it does not justify requiring enormous change and putting pennies on the table to pay for it. Known as the Empowerment Act, it is a great example of a word used at cross purposes to its meaning. Who is empowered?

Whatever the considerable inconsistencies, or vagaries, of state government in policy requirements or funding insufficiencies, there is no relief in law (other than being declared academically, or financially, distressed) for local boards from the requirement that they operate schools and educate children. There is also no relief for the local taxpayer from the requirement that they pay whatever is required to accomplish that task, through the use of a tax based on the value of their property. This is true whether it is a district composed of poor, unemployed, older people, with property value counted in memories, not dollars, or one composed of the more affluent whose property values are much, much higher. The law applies equally, and the same state mandates must be met in Tussey Mountain as in Radnor, and whether they are paid for by sweat and pain, or spare change.

Of course, if you have looked at the new version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act you realize that concerns about state hegemony over public education may be passe'. It appears that the federal government is positioned to be the next big player in the control game. Apart from its fixation on testing, there is a lot to like about this law, but it leverages far more control than it pays for. ESEA is one shoe dropping. At the local level all you have to do is avoid getting hit by the next one and, of course, pay for the shoes.



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SUPERINTENDENT MENTORING PROGRAM

At the recent Annual Meeting the Board of Directors approved a SUPERINTENDENT MENTORING PROGRAM, a hands-on, "nuts and bolts" program designed for the educator new to the superintendency or for those persons aspiring to become a superintendent. The program will feature presentations by experts in the field on various topics including:

- Superintendent/Board Relations
- Public Relations
- PDE Annual Reports
- Collective Bargaining
- Strategic Planning
- Chapter 4 Regulations
- Special Education Regulations
- PlanCon
- School Finance and Budgeting
- Personnel Issues
- Technology Initiatives

Additionally, participants will be expected to develop an entry plan at the initial session.

Sessions are scheduled at the Holiday Inn Express, Breezewood, PA on these dates:

- July 15
- October 25
- January 24
- March 28

A culminating activity will be scheduled April 23 at the Annual PARSS meeting. In addition to the expert presentations, ALL PARTICIPANTS WILL BE LINKED TO A MENTOR WHO IS EITHER A PRACTICING SUPERINTENDENT OR A RECENTLY RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT.

Total cost for all sessions is \$925 for non-members and \$795 for PARSS members, which includes continental breakfast, lunch, snacks and beverages at each session. This program is truly a remarkable bargain in an era when fiscal prudence is essential. Act 48 hours will be awarded for attendance at all sessions.

For an application or additional information please contact Dr. James Kiscaden, 717-687-6238 or Kiscadenljkj@aol.com. Deadline for applications is July 8, 2002.

RETURN TO SERVICE CONSIDERATIONS *Thinking About Returning To Service?* *Thinking About Un-Retiring?*

Alex Dubil, Retired Superintendent

Having retired as a public school administrator in June, 1999, I was intrigued by the thought of returning to service under the provisions of act 9 when it was signed into law in May, 2001. Returning to active service and earning three additional years of Pennsylvania public school service credit in order to have all prior public school service converted to the new membership class (class t-d) with the higher benefit formula (2.5 percent) seemed like a no-brainer.

Through a subsequent telephone call to my PSERs regional representative I learned that a return to service to capture the new rate of 2.5 percent would result in a debt being applied to my account to eliminate what is known as the frozen present value of my account. This would result in a smaller increase in my monthly benefit after three additional years of service than I had calculated without knowledge of the debt clause.

If you are retired and are considering a return to service to take advantage of act 9 of 2001 you need to become aware of just what this debt elimination means to you. By returning to service and retiring again after accumulating three or more years of service credit in your new account you will assume a debt to eliminate the frozen present value of your account. This debt represents the funds you have received during your retirement period plus applied interest. Included in this debt is the total of the monthly benefits you have

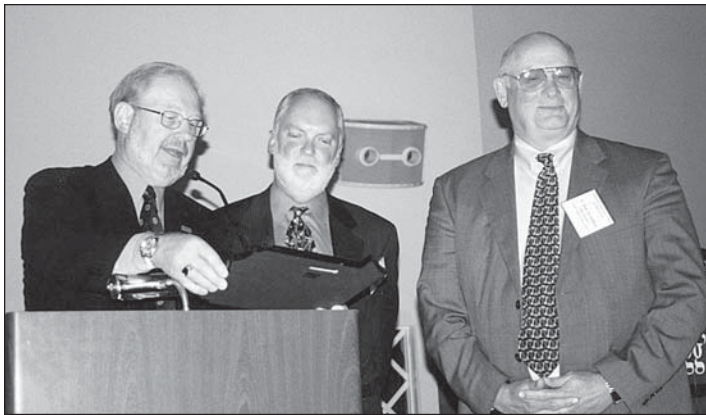
received and any money you withdrew at retirement. Interest on this debt is calculated at 8.5 percent each year. If you had an actuarial reduction in lieu of buying credited years at retirement, this also becomes part of your debt but at a rate of 4.0 percent. The total debt is subtracted from the present value of your account. This has the effect of substantially reducing the value of your account and must be taken into consideration when calculating how much your monthly benefit will actually increase after the three years of additional service.

The bottom line is a retiree cannot capture the higher benefit formula without dealing with the debt placed against the account. you can eliminate this debt by various methods including a lump sum payment, monthly payments, or through an actuarial reduction when you retire again after the minimum three years.

An estimate of new benefits, based on your projected new final average, from your psers regional representative can help you determine whether you feel it is financially worthwhile to return to service for a minimum of three years. Eliminating the frozen present value of your account is an extremely detailed calculation and psers strongly suggests you speak with your regional representative to make your personal decision about possibly returning to public school service.



Legislative Panel: Scott Peifer, Chris Wakely, Dave Broderic, and Dave Dumeyer update participants at the Annual Meeting on education issues in Harrisburg.



Joe Bard, Executive Director, Allan Schoonover, President, and Tom Schmidt from the law firm of Pepper Hamilton.

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH SCHOOL FUNDING

It is possible that by the time you receive this missive, the state budget could be passed. However, that will not mean that school funding and taxation issues will go underground. On the contrary, both Gubernatorial candidates have pledged to have a special session on these subjects as soon as they can at the beginning of their terms.

PARSS is in the process of setting up meetings with each of the candidates to discuss what we can do to further their interest in school funding.

The Rhoades proposal, with some necessary alterations, is still in the forefront of possibilities. As President Schoonover said when it was introduced. It may

have some things in it that we are not fond of, but it still is better than anything else that is out there. There has been one Senate work session on the proposal with a number to go.

The Micozzie proposal has not been at the forefront of the news recently. There has been little action on it in the House. The House is concentrating on the H.R. 42 Commission Report, which was due on May 31st. As of this writing there is some evidence that the commission has not yet completed its work and may ask for an extension. That is yet to be seen. If it is available, we will put it on the PARSS website, www.parss.org

Other proposals in the House have not yet been placed into motion, but seem to have more to do with tax reform than school funding. There are some by Reps. Steil and Rubely that are not yet committed to bill form. There is also Rep. Lewis' proposal that has attracted a number of cosigners. Mr. Lewis comes from the Poconos, which has particular problems with real estate taxes. Will there be action before the new Governor is elected? There are some who say that this is the perfect time to do something and others who say it can't happen without the leadership of the Governor.

PARSS CONFERENCE EVAL.

Sometimes it's hard to live up to your own expectations. It would be difficult to top some of our prior year's evaluations of the PARSS Annual Meeting. However, that is just what we did this year. The evaluations are based on a four (4) point system. This year's 3.77 evaluation is the highest ever.

We certainly had some comments that require investigation. However, we are more than happy with such comments as, "Great conference—great organization—"PARSS does so much for rural and small schools!"

The group continually gives high grades to the political sessions on the last day. Terry Madonna and the staff members from the Senate and House Education Committees could have extended their times by an hour and still have kept everyone's attention. The Banquet speakers Dena and Andy McKelvey discussing the scholarships for rural students were a highlight of the meeting. We wish them luck in their endeavors.

We would like to see all of you at next year's session on April 24 and 25th and the popular golf tourney on the 23rd.

MESSAGE BOARD

The PARSS message board has been inactive for the past number of months. As a PARSS member you get into it by logging on the the website and going into log-in. You have an log-in name which is your e-mail and a password which has been given to you. If you need to retrieve it, please let us know. The Message Board will be active within the next month. We will keep you posted by e-mail.

