



LEGISLATIVE UPDATES FROM HARRISBURG

The General Assembly will have a limited voting schedule to finish out the year after last week's Senate and House session. The House has 15 voting days on tap, while the Senate will be in for 12 days. The House will resume session this week while the Senate returns on October 18.

Last week COVID and election changes continued to dominate the legislative agenda. The House debated legislation (House Bill 1254), sponsored by Allegheny County Republican Carrie Lewis DelRosso, which would have expanded tuition vouchers for students in districts not providing full-time face-to-face instruction as a result of COVID. The cost of the voucher would have come at district expense in the amount of the district's per student state subsidy.

Before voting on H.B. 1254 the House considered an amendment offered by House Education Chair Curt Sonney (R-Erie). The Sonney amendment limited the tuition grant program to 2021-22 and authorized students in districts not offering face-to-face instruction or where parents objected to district COVID remediation policies, e.g., mask mandates, to apply for tuition grants for non-public schools or for another public school. The Sonney amendment also required districts to transport students moving to non-public schools (current law), but also to another district. The House ultimately voted down the Sonney amendment by a vote of 105-94 with 20 Republicans joining all House Democrats in opposition. (To see how your legislator voted on this important amendment go here: [See House Vote.](#))

NOTE: The future of the legislation is unknown. A reconsideration motion has already been filed so the House could return to debate on the amendment at any moment. This was an important vote to prevent further expansion of vouchers and their resulting cost to districts. It was also a victory for local decision-making in addressing student and staff safety in a COVID environment.

In committee activity last week, the House Education Committee approved four bills: House Bills 1332, 1642, 1685, and 1892.

House Bill 1332—This bill amends the Public School Code to require a school entity to post all curriculum offered by the school entity on its publicly accessible internet website and update the information each time new or revised curriculum is used by the school entity.

House Bill 1642—This bill amends the Public School Code to increase the number of schools/students eligible to participate in the Economically Disadvantaged Schools Program.

House Bill 1685—This bill is a comprehensive approach to charter school reform, incorporating many amendments to the Charter School Law that have passed the House in previous sessions. The prime sponsor is Representative Jessie Topper (R-Bedford) who has lead charter reform efforts in previous sessions. House Bill 1685, among other changes, would impose new ethics standards on charters, allow for electronic Keystone Exams for charter students, standardize new charter school applications, and encourage collaboration between charter, districts, CTCs and IUs. New provisions in the proposal would be reinstatement of a charter expense reimbursement program to provide an offset of a portion of district charter tuition costs with state support and providing language to codify district authority for virtual instructional delivery without creating a charter school.

House Bill 1892— The legislation is designed to increase the accuracy of a charter school request for a district subsidy deduction where the charter has contended that the district failed to pay its charter tuition. This bill would require PDE to notify districts of deduction in advance and provide for a district appeal. Charters would be required to maintain proof of enrollment and residency for its students. This bill is very positive step forward in fixing the very messy and unfair subsidy deduction process for charter school tuition. The prime sponsor of the bill is Rep.Sonney.

The Senate Education Committee also met last week to move legislation to the Senate Floor. The following bills were voted out of committee as amended:

Senate Bill 603— This bill will establish a standard protocol when a tick is found on a child during the school day. The bill would require school officials to notify parents about the tick removal and the symptoms of Lyme disease. The legislation will also detail uniform guidelines that all elementary and high schools must follow if a tick is removed from a child during school hours or on school grounds.

Senate Bill 786—The legislation formalizes open campus initiatives, provides for cooperative agreements among school entities, addresses reimbursements by the Commonwealth and establishes parental and public information procedures

Senate Bill 846—This is another bill addressing COVID measures in schools. Under this bill, parents would be granted the right to opt out of district-imposed mask mandate. The opt out form must be posted on the district's website. The district could not restrict a student who opts out from school activities or isolate non-masked students from masked students.

The Senate Education Committee will not meet this week. The House Education Committee's Subcommittee on Special Education will hold a public hearing in Harrisburg on the delivery of special education services to students in the Commonwealth.