

MASC Bulletin

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MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL COMMITTEES

Legislative Alert: Districts scramble in wake of budget shortfalls

Join school leaders at MASC Day on the Hill in support of additional resources

With the economy still in the doldrums, the Governor proposing a \$570 million cut in the FY12 budget and the end of the federal stimulus (ARRA) dollars that have helped school districts maintain programs, services and personnel over the past two years, the upcoming budget season looks a lot like a train wreck waiting to happen. Although the Governor (and President Obama in his recently released budget) has pledged to protect education funding, the pressure on the legislature from other competing interests will be severe. And while the pool of available resources shrinks, account-



ability and achievement requirements for schools and students continue to grow exponentially, with formerly needs-based grants now linked to achievement, evaluations and other competitive federal criteria.

Here's a tip for budget-shell-shocked school leaders: never before

has it been as imperative to remind your legislators of the critical need for additional and sustainable resources. If districts are to meet the challenges of educating all children to a 21st century standard in an era of increasingly fierce global competition, it will require maintaining—and growing—those learning experiences. This and other issues (see sidebar “Legislative Priorities” page 6) will lead the agenda at **MASC's 2011 DAY ON THE HILL** program at the State House on Tuesday, March 29. Members are encouraged to bring the message to Beacon Hill that real

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DESE grants two-day extension on selected MCAS tests

DESE Commissioner Mitchell Chester has announced that he will extend the window for MCAS testing in English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science and Technology/Engineering (STE) for **grades 3–8** by two days. The deadline to submit MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) portfolios has been extended by four days (for complete list of dates: www.doe.mass.edu/news).

The administration and return dates for high school ELA, Math and Science and Technology/Engineering dates have not changed.

The Commissioner explained that

although a number of districts requested between a week and three-week delay in administering/returning the test, the logistics of rescheduling those contracted as scorers and the scoring site proved both onerous and very expensive. Chester also urged districts that did not experience numerous weather-related school closings to complete their MCAS ELA testing as soon as possible in order to enable the testing contractor to begin the process of scoring compositions on time.

School funding/NCLB reform lead MASC/Congressional dialogues

As school districts enter one of the most challenging budget seasons in decades, made even more difficult by the still-sluggish economy and the loss of federal stimulus dollars, eight members of MASC's Federal Relations Network took their case to Capitol Hill last month as participants in the School Leadership/Federal Relations summit presented by the National School Boards Association.

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In visits to Capitol Hill, the Massachusetts delegation had lengthy, productive discussions with Congressmen Michael Capuano, James McGovern, William Keating, John Tierney and Senator Scott Brown and with education advisors to Senator John Kerry and Congressmen Stephen Lynch, Richard Neal, Edward Markey, Nikki Tsongas and Barney Frank. At these meetings, the legislators and their aides peppered MASC members with many thoughtful questions about the impact of the economy on districts ability to provide services to students and MASC asked the legislators to support initiatives to provide more flexibility for schools as well as a continued level of federal funding that can match the extensive obligations that the NCLB law places on schools. MASC members also presented compelling testimony on the negative ramifications of NCLB (which is up for renewal this year), as well as the need for full federal funding for IDEA, the impact of student mobility on school districts and student achievement; continued support for the Perkins Act and vocational education; and asked legislators to support repeal of the Government Pension Offset and Windfall Elimination Provision of the Social Security Act in order to make it possible for districts to hire high quality teachers from private industry.

In workshops and breakout sessions during the three-day event, attendees were briefed on key education issues by NSBA staff, including the urgent need for members to advocate strongly for accountability changes to NCLB and for adequate funding for public education, not only to help stem losses during the ongoing economic downturn, but also to enable districts to support the spiraling costs of educational mandates.

According to NSBA Associate Executive Director Michael Resnick—NSBA's eyes and ears on

Capitol Hill—NCLB is seriously flawed and needs to be overhauled, not simply reauthorized and he urged attendees to insist that school boards play a role in creating new legislation. "Congress must support, not supplant, the priorities of local school boards and do more than just "recognize" that meeting the challenges of a 21st century global education requires a strong public school system—Congress needs to "act" on it and provide the funding to ensure that your districts have the resources necessary to offer well-designed programs taught by world-class teachers."

Veteran Washington commentator Norm Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, was blunt in his assessment of the political roadblocks facing education over the next two years, noting the "faux bipartisanship" on show during the recent State of the Union and the unpredictability of the many new, maverick legislators. "We're heading for a series of showdowns that will grow increasingly divisive and bitter," he projected. With the Stimulus Funding cushion now a thing of the past and with Tea Party and other pressures to reduce federal spending, education and health are the most vulnerable to significant cuts in funding. "For school leaders, this should be your call to action: you can't sit back and wait as the budget battle intensifies."

Nationally recognized education historian Diane Ravitch, a former US assistant secretary of education and convert from the "dark side" (for many years she was a leading proponent of charter schools), offered a spirited condemnation of many of the school reform ideas that are being foisted on the nation's schools. Decrying the naysayers who, she warns, are out to demoralize the education community and undermine public confidence in the public schools, Ravitch suggests their eyes are on the "education industry." The cacophony against public schools, she contends, is the work of a small cadre of industry tycoons who are

eager to put schools in the hands of private entrepreneurs.

This effort really gained momentum with the passage of the NCLB "a toxic piece of legislation" which set impossibly high standards ensuring that large numbers of schools would eventually be labeled as "failing."

"No Child Left Behind is a timetable for the deconstruction of public education in America."

Ravitch was equally critical of the Obama administration's Race to the Top program for its competitive approach to reform, and its emphasis on simply closing schools deemed low-performing. "The federal role in education was designed to bring equity to the nation's schools, not to create a generation of winners and losers for federal funding, nor to put thousands of children on a treadmill from one low-performing school to another." She urged school leaders to send the message to Congress that "closing schools is not a turnaround strategy. Evaluate their needs, help fix them and get out of the business of punishing schools."

MASC also played a featured role during the two-day Leadership portion of the NSBA program that preceded the Federal Relations Network events. Immediate Past President Kathleen Robey, a member of the Marlboro School Committee, was a featured presenter describing the state's Race to the Top experience, what was learned during Round 1 which enabled a successful outcome in Round 2. In addition, at the NSBA National Resolutions Committee hearing which took place during the Leadership Meeting, MASC, led by Vice President Mary Jo Rossetti of Somerville, advocated successfully for support for landmark legislation to address the struggles of transient students. The resolution, which was first supported by the MASC 2010 Delegate Assembly, will now go to the 200-member National Delegate Assembly where it will be considered before being sent as a resolution to Congress.

because you asked....

In recent weeks, a number of members have called the MASC office with budget-season related questions, and most frequently, with questions about the new executive session law and its requirements. The questions (and answers, supplied by Mike Gilbert, MASC Field Director—Information and Technology) are reprinted below for your information.

SCHOOL CHOICE:

Q: Our School Committee holds a public hearing and vote each spring on School Choice. Our district has historically voted no to participation in School Choice. Is the public hearing necessary or can the School Committee just vote?

A: Yes, if there is a possibility that the district will not participate in the state School Choice program for the following school year. Under MGL Chapter 76 Section 12B the School Committee is obligated to hold the public hearing and vote on School Choice participation prior to June 1st or they are a school choice receiving district under the law. Essentially, the School Choice law is an “opt-out” statute for school districts, meaning that you are in unless you vote to opt out.

The Public Hearing can be held within a regular School Committee meeting but the advertising rules are a little different. A public hearing must be advertised in the local paper 7 days prior to the hearing. Also, just like a posted School Committee meeting, you post/advertise the hearing for a specific time and you cannot open the hearing before that time.

EXECUTIVE SESSION MINUTES:

Q: Does the School Committee need to approve Executive Session minutes in Executive Session?

A: The approval of School Committee meeting minutes simply makes them the official record of the School Committee. The release of minutes may be a different action. School Committee meeting minutes of open sessions are an open public record as soon as they are taken and a School Committee must release the minutes of open sessions when asked, even if those minutes are not yet approved by the School Committee. You can mark unapproved minutes as “draft”.

Executive session minutes may be withheld from the public until the reason for the executive session passes. There may be some minutes or some portion of minutes that are never released. The only reason I can think of to go back into executive session would be to amend a portion of the minutes that could not be done in open session without compromising the executive session nature of the material. If the School Committee needed to do this they would use the same reason to enter executive session.

In order to release executive session minutes, the School Committee should have a policy or procedure for periodic review of executive session minutes. Many Committees direct the Chair and Superintendent to handle this and make decisions to move executive session minutes to releasable. Some Committees require a vote of the full Committee. If there are questions regarding release of a set of minutes it may be prudent to ask legal counsel to review them. If a School Committee is asked through a public records request for a set of executive session minutes that have not been authorized for release, they must review those minutes and render a decision at the next School Committee meeting or within 30 days whichever is sooner.

Good practices help focus on strategic goals

“Process” often overlooked by school committees, helps boost school leader effectiveness

(Adapted from an article by Del Stover that appeared in the Winter 2011 issue of NSBA's Council of Urban Education publication Urban Advocate.)

In conversations with school committee members across the country, one strategy is being mentioned with increasing frequency in discussions of what boards are doing to monitor student achievement and ensure that they are staying on track with identified goals. One of the simplest ways to stay focused on “the big picture” board members say and not get distracted by operational details or the controversy of the week is to develop a year-long schedule for reviewing progress in advancing the strategic goals of the school system.

Board members interviewed consider this strategy proactive and in its simplest form, breaks down the year, the scheduled board meetings, those responsibilities that members have to fulfill as defined by law and how best to align the meeting calendar with the board's defined goals. This ensures that each month some issue of strategic value to the school system, whether it's progress on student reading scores or the efficacy of professional development practices, is considered by the board.

That's the power of process—a concept that school governance experts constantly encourage in a school committee's work. One of the great ironies of school committee service is that members are so eager to make plans and decisions, yet, in the rush to bring about change, they often overlook how to bring about those changes, under-appreciating how process and procedure can

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Focusing on Goals

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make their decision-making more effective.

And it's not hard to see the impact when such processes are lacking. School committees write ambitious strategic plans and then let them gather dust on a shelf as their attention is distracted by daily concerns. School leaders are adamant that student achievement is the top priority of the school system, yet somehow the regular meeting agenda is often dominated by issues far removed from instruction.

Of course, the value of good processes and practices goes beyond their ability to focus the committee. Implementing step-by-step procedures and establishing rules of conduct are part of a good governance model that helps the committee reaffirm its policy and oversight roles. Good processes empower a school committee by enabling it to use policy effectively to become a change agent for the system.

One example of the power of such a process is how a school committee fulfills its oversight role. According to a school governance consultant for the California School Boards Association, it's very easy for school committee members to feel frustrated and powerless if they believe their role is simply to listen to staff-generated reports. And if problems arise, it's more likely the committee will react by digging into an issue and slip into crisis mode and/or micromanagement. Far better is a process where the committee sets guidelines on what reports it needs—and how frequently information is to be provided. Then the committee can be ready to focus on these reports, look at the progress being made and, if problems are identified, they can be discussed in the framework of the committee's strategic goals. It may be that the committee directs the issue to the superintendent, or perhaps considers policy changes or a refocus of resources.

Another example of process for

MASC News

Service animals, and other policies

The most recent issue of the **MASC Policy Newsletter** has been sent to all school committee members, superintendents and school committee secretaries. The newsletter includes sample policies on service animals in schools; admission of students transferring from Commonwealth charter schools; and an advisory for school districts on dealing with concussions and other potentially serious head injuries. The newsletter has also been posted on the MASC website and members can access it in the Members Resources Section at: www.masc.org/member-resources

committees to consider is asking the superintendent to implement cross-functional "action" teams to address issues. These teams might consist of anyone from school committee members to school administrators to other appropriate district personnel to propose answers to a pressing problem that doesn't necessarily require the full committee's attention.

The problem for school leaders isn't that they are ignorant of process. They use it all the time—in reviewing the annual budget, evaluating the superintendent, and developing their strategic plan for the school system. The real challenge is sticking to the process and resisting the urge to cut corners when progress is slow or public criticism raises the temptation to move too quickly. Training can help: this ensures that all the committee members understand and are on board with the processes they have agreed to and reinforces an appreciation for their common vision/goals and how the process will help them reach that vision.

There is a library's worth of literature about school governance and the processes and practices that can help school committees (see some references at right). But what may

Legislator Sign-on Update

Since the publication of the January issue of the **MASC Bulletin** in which legislation filed by MASC and the sponsoring legislators was listed, the following legislators have since signed on to MASC initiatives. They are:

Representatives **Kevin Aguiar** (Fall River); **Jennifer Benson** (Lunenburg) (*An Act Relative to School Improvement Plans*)

Representatives **Elizabeth Malia** (Boston); **Carl Sciortino** (Somerville) (*An Act Relative to Charter Schools*)

Representatives **Carolyn Dykema** (Holliston); **Stephen DiNatale** (Fitchburg); **Chris Walsh** (Framingham) (*An Act Relative to Special Education Reimbursements*)

really help your committee is to pay more attention to the processes you do have—and others that can help you to remain focused on your goals.

Resources on Practices and Processes to Boost School Committee Effectiveness from the National School Board Association's monthly magazine **American School Board Journal (ASBJ)**.

- "Talking about Change." Traditional long-range planning has its place, but when looking at the major issues your district faces, consider taking a strategic approach that is separate and distinct. July, 2010
- "Excellence by Design." Board committees are the best way to make sure you are continuously improving your governance practices, but only if the committees have a process and plan in place. June, 2010
- "The Board-Superintendent RX." How you evaluate your CEO is key to maintaining a working relationship that is positive, productive and enduring. Do you have a good process in place? July, 2008
- "Building a Budget." The process can be irritating and frustrating for the board, but you do have a role and should be involved in a meaningful way. May, 2007

These and other articles are available on ASBJ's online archive at www.asbj.com.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE LEADERSHIP ANNOUNCED

Earlier this month Speaker of the House Robert DeLeo and Senate President Therese Murray announced their Legislative Committee appointments. Chairs and Vice Chairs of Committees with particular relevance to issues around public education are listed below.

HOUSE COMMITTEES

Bills in Third Reading

Rep. Vincent Pedrone, Chair

Post Audit and Oversight

Rep. David Paul Linsky, Chair

Rep. Benjamin Swan, Vice Chair

Rules

Rep. John Binienda, Chair

Rep. Cory Atkins, Vice Chair

Ways & Means

Rep. Brian Dempsey, Chair

Rep. Stephen Kulik, Vice Chair

Rep. Martha Walz, Assistant Vice Chair

SENATE COMMITTEES

Bills in Third Reading

Sen. Cynthia Stone Creem, Chair

Sen. John A. Hart, Vice Chair

Post Audit and Oversight

Sen. Mark Montigny, Chair

Sen. Cynthia Stone Creem, Vice Chair

Ethics & Rules

Sen. Frederick Berry, Chair

Sen. Karen Spilka, Vice Chair

Ways & Means

Sen. Stephen Brewer, Chair

Sen. Steven Baddour, Vice Chair

Sen. Jennifer Flanagan, Asst. Vice Chair

JOINT COMMITTEES

Children, Families & Persons with Disabilities

Rep. Kay Khan, Chair

Sen. Michael Rodrigues, Chair

Rep. John Fernandes, Vice Chair

Sen. Kenneth Donnelly, Vice Chair

Election Laws

Rep. Michael Moran, Chair

Sen. Barry Finegold, Chair

Rep. Sean Garballey, Vice Chair

Sen. Sal DiDomenico, Vice Chair

Higher Education

Rep. Tom Sannicandro, Chair

Sen. Michael Moore, Chair

Rep. Thomas Calter, Vice Chair

Sen. Eileen Donoghue, Vice Chair

Labor and Workforce Development

Rep. Cheryl Coakley-Rivera, Chair

Sen. Daniel Wolf, Chair

Rep. Lori Erlich, Vice Chair

Sen. Michael Rodrigues, Vice Chair

Mental Health & Substance Abuse

Rep. Elizabeth Malia, Chair

Sen. John Keenan, Chair

Rep. Angelo Scaccia, Vice Chair

Sen. Michael Rush, Vice Chair

Municipalities & Regional Government

Rep. Michael Kane, Chair

Sen. James Welch, Chair

Rep. Joyce Spiliotis, Vice Chair

Sen. Daniel Wolf, Vice Chair

Public Health

Rep. Jeffrey Sanchez, Chair

Sen. Susan Fargo, Chair

Rep. Jason Lewis, Vice Chair

Sen. Harriette Chandler, Vice Chair

Public Safety & Homeland Security

Rep. Harold Naughton, Jr., Chair

Sen. James Timilty, Chair

Rep. Michael Brady, Vice Chair

Sen. Michael Moore, Vice Chair

Public Service

Rep. John Scibak, Chair

Sen. Katherine Clark, Chair

Rep. Dennis Rosa, Vice Chair

Sen. Jennifer Flanagan, Vice Chair

Revenue

Rep. Jay Kaufman, Chair

Sen. Gale Candaras, Chair

Rep. Kevin Aguiar, Vice Chair

Sen. James Timilty, Vice Chair

State Administration & Regulatory Oversight

Rep. Peter Kocot, Chair

Sen. Kenneth Donnelly, Chair

Rep. James Murphy, Vice Chair

Sen. James Welch, Vice Chair

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Rep. Alice Hanlon Peisch, Chair

Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz, Chair

Rep. David Sullivan, Vice Chair

Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair

Rep. John Rogers

Rep. Geraldine Creedon

Rep. Sean Curran

Rep. Jennifer Benson

Rep. Marcos Devers

Rep. Denise Garlick

Rep. Carlos Tony Henriquez

Rep. Kimberly Ferguson

Rep. David Vieira

Sen. Sal DiDomenico

Sen. Katherine Clark

Sen. Barry Finegold

Sen. Richard Ross

Legislative Alert: Districts Scramble

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achievement and accountability can only be accomplished with real dollars.

This year's advocacy program will include critical discussions around the future of education funding in an era of high expectations; the need for additional flexibility around the many competing assessment requirements; and a renewed call for legislative commitment to comprehensive school funding.

School committee presence at Day on the Hill is critical, according to MASC President Dorothy Presser. With the House budget due to be released in mid-April and the Senate budget in mid-May, "now is the time to impress upon your legislators the urgency of moving forward to make the necessary fiscal and regulatory reforms that will preserve school programs and ensure long-term sustainability."

Day on the Hill registration information has been mailed to all school committee members and superintendents and registration information is posted online. As in the past, MASC encourages members to invite their student representative to the school committee to join them at the program absolutely free of charge.

Please contact the MASC office if you have any questions about the

program (800)392-6023 or check the MASC website (www.masc.org) for Day on the Hill registration information and updates. We look forward to seeing you at the State House on March 29.

And don't forget to invite your legislators to join you for lunch in the Great Hall—prepared and presented by MA vocational school students.

**Day on the Hill
March 29, 2011
REGISTER NOW!**

MASC Events

Division III (Southeast) Meeting

March 14 (M), 6:00pm

King Philip Regional High School

MASC Regional Committee Meeting

March 17 (Th), 6:00pm

Assabet Valley Reg. Tech. High School

Division IV (Central) Meeting

March 23 (W), 6:30am

Algonquin Reg., Northboro

2011 Legislative Priorities

**Adequate and Equitable
Distribution of Chapter 70
School Aid**

**Local and Regional
Transportation Funding**

**Charter School Finance
Reform**

**Full Funding of Special
Education Circuit Breaker**

**Require Local Approval for
District Consolidation**

**Streamline the 15
Accountability, Assessment
and Accreditation Systems**

**Funding to Support Education
for Mobile Students**

**Strengthen the Children's
Services Safety Net through
Collaboration**

**Federal Grant Fundraising for
Districts—not Bureaucracies!**

Massachusetts Association of School Committees

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