

JFC Testimony: EDUCATION – February 17, 2010

Diane Donohue, president, Delaware State Education Association

Good afternoon to our Chairs, Senator Cook and Representative Williams, and to the other members of the Joint Finance Committee. I am Diane Donohue, an educator in Delaware for 20 years and the president of the Delaware State Education Association, which proudly represents over 11,000 educators in our state.

As our communities struggle with an economy in recession, it is apparent that the impact of a sluggish economic recovery will continue. Consequently, the state must continue to make difficult choices about the allocation of dwindling resources.

The Delaware State Education Association appreciates the work of the Joint Finance Committee in doing what you can to support the students and educators in Delaware. We thank you and urge you to continue your efforts.

Every difficult decision you make that can preserve a dollar of education funding today, will pay off in large returns in the future.

Investment in public education includes many things such as safe, clean buildings, enough books for every student, day to day supplies, such as paper, and of course, the ever growing need for technology and access to computers for all students.

However, nothing defines the school experience for a child more than educators; and the investment in educators is what I will focus on today.

When DSEA speaks of “educators,” we mean a whole team of professionals who touch the lives of all students each and every day. A student’s day begins with the “Good morning” from the school bus driver; continues with the dedication and expertise of the classroom teacher; helping hands of a

paraprofessional; the kindness of cafeteria food service; the tough love of a coach; the guidance of counselors; and continues on with nurses, secretaries, custodians, speech therapists, and more.

It has always been critical to have high-quality people in education positions, but now the eyes of the nation are on our educators and students. The Obama Administration and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have placed education reform efforts on a fast-paced time frame. The expectations have never been higher and, as a consequence, the profession is becoming much more complicated and stressful.

There is the potential for additional financial resources to help achieve our goals. For example, I believe that Delaware has positioned itself to receive resources from the federal government in the form of School Improvement Grants, and Race To The Top funds. This money will help us with many of the old challenges, as well as create a few new ones.

Even with these additional funds, it is not enough. The base salaries and benefits essential to the attraction and retention of the best educators will have to come from Delaware, not from the Federal Government.

With that in mind, there are several key compensation areas that DSEA would like to have restored as soon as possible:

- Number one: The five furlough days cost our members both money and professional development at a time when they can scarcely afford either. Our cut amounted to 2.56% of salary. I'm not telling you anything new by saying that it is challenging and demoralizing to our members, and that the restoration of those days and compensation is a high priority for DSEA. Our biggest fear last year was that the five unpaid furlough days would become institutionalized, in spite of intentions and language to sunset the reduction. Now, here we are in another year with plans to continue the furlough and pay cut.

- Number two: In 2007 the Public Education Compensation Committee set goals for the Legislature to raise our Educational Support Salaries out of poverty. That journey was not completed. The 2009 federal poverty level for a family of four is \$22,050. The entry level salary for an instructional aide in Delaware is \$17,228. One would need 13 years of experience to reach the poverty level. This issue remains important to those members, and it remains important to DSEA.
- Number three: The moratorium on National Board Certification and Cluster professional development stipends must be lifted. This moratorium sends a very conflicting message to educators who are told by the Federal Government, ‘Improve yourself professionally and you will be compensated.’
- Number four: Weakening of the Short Term Disability program has created a hole in the safety net for educator families. This policy carries the potential for real tragedy. No one, let alone someone already battling serious illness, can go sixty days without pay.
- Finally, we have a new concern added to last year’s list; that of a proposed two-tiered health and pension plan. We do not have any details on what this plan might look like other than a different level of benefits for newly-hired educators. We need details as soon as possible. In order to make constructive policy recommendations in this area, we need to know what types of health and pension benefits are being considered for new-hires.

Our initial reaction is, “Find the money someplace else.” Reducing benefits to a two-tiered system does nothing to attract the best educators to Delaware, especially when our wages are already lower than our neighboring states.

If there is no other way – none - then at least let us sit down and work with you to develop something that reduces costs, but does limited harm for a limited amount of time. Every employee needs to eventually be made whole, in other words, stay with the profession for a given amount of time and become fully vested just like their colleagues.

We may be able to help you figure out how to make a bad situation a little better, but we will have to be brought into the discussion soon. These are big issues, big challenges.

I'm glad that you all stepped forward to be on the JFC. Everyone wants to be on the JFC when there is money to spend, but to do it in times like these shows commitment to public service which our members understand and applaud.

Thank you.



DSEA 136 E. Water St., Dover, DE 19901 1-866-734-5834 www.dsea.org

Diane Donohue, president
Mike Hoffmann, vice president
Karen Crouse, treasurer
Mary Jo Faust, NEA director
Howard Weinberg, executive director
Tim Barchak, director of legislation and political organizing

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