

Prince George's Business-Education Alliance Announces 2005 Legislative Agenda

COLLEGE PARK, MD (February 1, 2005) – The Prince George's Business-Education Alliance today announced an eight-point legislative agenda that will guide its efforts during the 2005 session of the Maryland General Assembly. If adopted by the legislature, the agenda would result in a major infusion of funds for both the county's public school system and Prince George's Community College.

The Alliance, which includes leaders of major companies located in Prince George's and affiliated business organizations, as well as the chief executives of the public schools and the community college, was created last year with the goal of ensuring that county students receive an excellent education, from kindergarten through college. The organization, conducts research, sponsors forums, and seeks to educate the public about the role and importance of public education.

The Alliance has identified the following as its key legislative priorities this year:

- Support continued full funding of the Thornton Commission recommendations embodied in the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act
- Support funding of the Geographic Cost of Education Index (GCEI) established under the terms of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act
- Support a substantial increase in state funding for the construction and renovation of schools
- Support full restoration of the Cade funding formula for community colleges
- Support enactment of legislation allowing retired teachers to be rehired by their school systems to fill vacancies, especially in fields experiencing teacher shortages, such as math, science, and special education
- Oppose any shifting of current state obligations, such as retirement contributions, onto local school systems

- Support the recommendations of the Task Force to Study Public School Facilities to increase the state share of school construction costs for projects in Prince George's County
- Support funding for planning of a new health technology building at Prince George's Community College.

Alliance Executive Director David Merkowitz said that the group plans to work closely with Prince George's senators and delegates to pursue the agenda. "We have meetings scheduled with both delegations in the next week," he said. "We expect this agenda to receive strong support and will discuss how the business community can help push it through."

Under the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, adopted by the General Assembly in 2002, the Prince George's school system is scheduled to receive an additional \$179.6 million in fiscal year 2006 over the 2002 appropriation. Last year, the Alliance supported efforts in the legislature to repeal a "trigger" mechanism that would have reduced the amount of additional aid going to school systems around the state. The repeal went into law last March without the governor's signature.

Merkowitz noted that the repeal essentially guaranteed the continued growth in state aid established under the Bridge to Excellence Act, and Governor Ehrlich has included the funds in his budget request. "However," he said, "we want to ensure that nothing is done in the legislature to impede the flow of state aid, or to saddle the public schools with expenses that until now have been considered state obligations."

Although the Bridge to Excellence Act called for establishment of a GCEI formula, the bill did not contain specific dollar figures for future years. Governor Ehrlich did not include funds for the GCEI in his budget in 2004 and failed to do so again this year. As a result, Prince George's lost about \$18 million in the current fiscal year and stands to do so again in fiscal 2006.

"The governor's refusal to fund the GCEI represents a loss of about \$130 per student in our schools," Merkowitz said. "That money could be used to reduce class sizes, provide more support for at-risk students, buy new textbooks and computers, and make other needed improvements. The legislature should move this year to make the GCEI a mandatory element of Bridge to Excellence funding."

An near-universal consensus has developed in recent months that the state must increase funding of school construction and renovation projects, and Governor Ehrlich included \$155 million in his proposed budget for those purposes. However, that figure is far below the \$250 million a commission led by state Treasurer Nancy Kopp said was needed to begin to address the backlog of school construction statewide.

Of the \$80 million in Ehrlich's request targeted to specific projects, Prince George's would receive only \$6.1 million, compared with its request for \$100.6 million.

"We can't expect our students to meet high standards, nor can we recruit talented, qualified teachers, if they have to work in crowded, decrepit buildings," Merkowitz said. "The state has to fund these vital capital investments to create the conditions in which learning can take place."

The Cade formula, named for a former state senator, links community college funding to a percentage of state support per full-time equivalent (FTE) student at the University of Maryland. When fully funded, it represents 25 percent of that state support per FTE. However, in recent years, community colleges took a "double hit" when the funding for four-year institutions was cut and the percentage was reduced. With full funding of the Cade formula, Prince George's Community College would receive about \$18.1 million in operating funds from the state.

The proposed Center for Health Studies building would house and support the community college's health education programs and a Technology Services Center for the entire Largo campus. The college has requested almost \$1.8 million from the state and just over \$1 million from the county this year to begin construction of the facility. The total estimated project cost is \$34.8 million.

"Almost half the graduates of the Prince George's Public Schools begin higher education at Prince George's Community College," Merkowitz noted. "That makes the college a key link to our economic future. Adequate funding is an absolute necessity if we want to prepare our students for the jobs of tomorrow."

Through last year, Maryland school systems were allowed to rehire retired teachers to fill vacant positions on a temporary basis. Prince George's made extensive use of this provision to meet a chronic teacher shortage. However, this exemption from prohibitions in the state retirement system expired at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, and efforts to renew it failed at the end of the 2004 General Assembly session. A similar bill is expected to be introduced soon. Halfway through the current school year, Prince George's still has several hundred unfilled teaching slots.

The Alliance developed its legislative agenda following consultations with public school and community college leaders and members of the General Assembly, as well as discussion at the Prince George's Business-Education Summit, which it conducted in December. "This comprehensive, coordinated approach demonstrates that the business community recognizes the vital role of education in the county's economy," Merkowitz said.