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Alliance Announces 2006 Legislative Agenda

The Prince George's Business-Education Alliance today announced a legislative agenda for the 2006 session of the Maryland General Assembly that would increase funding substantially for the county's public schools and Prince George's Community College. The ten-point agenda also calls for new programs and incentives designed to help underperforming students and schools.

The General Assembly begins its 90-day session tomorrow (Wednesday, January 11) in Annapolis.

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

- Continue full funding of the Thornton Commission recommendations embodied in the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act
- Fully fund the Geographic Cost of Education Index established under the terms of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act
- Increase the Cade funding formula for community colleges by one percentage point
- Substantially increase benefits for Maryland educators under the state Teachers' Pension System
- Create incentives to help school systems recruit and retain highly qualified teachers and attract them to difficult-to-staff schools
- Provide extended learning opportunities for students who fail to meet Maryland School Assessment standards
- Authorize and fund training programs designed to increase parental involvement in the schools
- Increase school construction and renovation funding beyond current year levels to reflect higher costs and meet growing needs
- Adopt 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
- Approve the Prince George's Community College capital budget request for \$5 million for work on eight construction, renovation, and improvement project.

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Alliance Executive Director David Merkwitz said that "Maryland's current budget surplus presents a unique opportunity for the state to make educational investments that will return major dividends over the coming decades." Although state education funding has increased significantly since 2003 under the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, and will continue to do so for several years, "those dollars are intended to meet the minimum requirements established by the Maryland Constitution," he noted. "Now we have the chance to improve teacher compensation, address the backlog in construction and renovation, and create new programs targeted to the schools and students that need them most."

Under the Bridge to Excellence Act, adopted by the General Assembly in 2002, state aid to the Prince George's school system will increase by about \$87 million in 2007 compared with the current fiscal year, bringing the total to roughly \$769 million. That figure does not include an estimated \$14.1 million the county would receive under the Geographic Cost-of-Education Index (GCEI), an element of the Bridge to Excellence Act designed to compensate school systems in areas where operating costs are higher, including Prince George's.

However, the state attorney general's office ruled in 2003 that, unlike the remainder of the act, the GCEI is not mandatory, and Governor Ehrlich has indicated that, as in previous years, he will exclude it from his proposed fiscal 2007 budget. Nevertheless, the 2007 budget plan announced recently by the Prince George's school system assumes GCEI funding, which constitutes almost one percent of the total.

Merkwitz said that the Alliance would make a strong push this year for GCEI funding. "By not including the GCEI, Governor Ehrlich cannot honestly claim to have fully funded the Bridge to Excellence Act," he stated. "And if the General Assembly again fails to make the GCEI mandatory, it will cost the Prince George's schools about \$110 per student. That money would have to be cut from the budget, meaning larger class sizes, less support for at-risk students, and fewer new textbooks and computers."

The Alliance agenda supports a request by Maryland's community colleges for an increase in the funding formula that determines how much state aid they receive. That formula is pegged to the amount of state support per full-time equivalent (FTE) student allocated to the University of Maryland. The Cade Formula, which represents 25 percent of the UM figure, was cut in 2003 and 2004 before being restored last year, costing the community colleges almost \$30 million. A one percentage point annual increase through 2011 would boost state aid by an average of \$7.5 million per year.

Governor Ehrlich is asking for a slight increase in school construction and renovation spending from the \$251.8 million provided last year by the General Assembly. However, that would not be enough to keep up with rapid inflation in construction costs. "Failure to increase the school construction budget adequately would place an extra burden on jurisdictions that have a significant backlog of such projects, including Prince George's County," Merkowitz said.

The Prince George's Community College capital budget is part a \$75.6 million request by the Maryland Association of Community Colleges to fund 36 projects at 13 institutions across the state. Major projects at PGCC include construction of a Center for Health Studies and a High Technology Center and installation of a sprinkler system.

The Alliance also is supporting efforts initiated by the Maryland State Teachers Association to increase benefits for educators under the state pension system, which currently are among the worst in the nation. Maryland teachers now receive about 38 percent of their final average salary upon retirement after 30 years of service — about half the amount offered in neighboring Pennsylvania.

Legislation to create incentives for recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers at failing schools, provide extended learning opportunities for underperforming students, and develop training programs to increase parental involvement in the schools is expected to be introduced after the General Assembly convenes. "These kinds of targeted programs can make a huge difference in Prince George's County," Merkowitz said, "and in the lives of students whose futures hang in the balance."

The Alliance developed its legislative agenda following consultations with public school and community college leaders and members of the General Assembly. Over the next month, it will meet with members of the Prince George's House and Senate delegations to promote the agenda and emphasize the support it enjoys from the county's business community.

The Alliance 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. Its goal is to ensure 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.