In Budget & Finance News...

**Early Intervention Funding** – Governor Tom Wolf last week announced he is dedicating approximately $3 million for Preschool Early Intervention Programs serving children 3 to 5-years-old to purchase personal protective equipment and other pandemic-related supplies. Preschool Early Intervention Programs offering classroom services to eligible children may request GEER funds to provide personal protective equipment, sanitation and disinfecting supplies, and additional staff to support COVID-19 mitigation and training on health and safety practices. (from a press release, 7/28/20)

**Senate HEALS Act** – (from AASA) Last week Senate Republicans released their marker bill for the fifth COVID response. The overall bill does not include any additional budget aid for state and local governments, which will likely be a top consideration in how much officials at that level cut their education budgets in response to the economic slowdown. Additional K12 funding would move to states based on overall population (60%) and on Title I share (40%), with private schools eligible for all the same funding that public schools are eligible for as long as they meet the same re-opening criteria. Language in how the new funds would be allocated is tighter than that in the CARES Act and does NOT include retroactive fix of CARES problem for CARES funding.

The bill includes $105 billion for the Department of Education and specifically ties about $45 billion to reopening public and private elementary and secondary schools. One-third would be available to all schools immediately, with the remaining two-thirds available for reopening costs, with funding awarded based on certain minimum opening requirements (and other criteria established by the states). For the conditional two-thirds, funding would automatically be approved for LEAs that provide in-person instruction for at least ½ the students for at least ½ the days. LEAs providing no in-person instruction would receive no funding, and those that provide some in-person instruction would be awarded reduced funding on a pro-rata basis. LEAs would have to develop plans that include a detailed timeline of when in-person instruction will occur, describe how many in-person instruction days/week are being offered, and provide assurance that the LEA will offer students as much in-person instruction as is safe and practicable.

Concerning liability, the bill provides a federal cause of action for COVID exposure claims against employers, including schools. The cause of action is the exclusive remedy for all claims against a defendant for personal injury caused by actual, alleged, feared or potential exposure to COVID. The bill covers coronavirus-related exposure injuries that occur between Dec. 1, 2019 and Oct. 1, 2024, and impacted parties would have to show LEAs were grossly negligent or demonstrated willful misconduct and that they violated relevant state and local public health guidelines.

According to AASA, the Senate Republican plan is a “message bill” that includes a lot of non-starters for the education community, as well as for Senate Democrats and the U.S. House. In addition, there are a lot of pressures at play outside of content, including the upcoming August recess and political campaigns, as members of Congress do not want to go home for August recess without having at least made significant inroads on another round of federal support. Plus, unemployment insurance is a key driver in negotiating something quickly.

The Senate GOP proposal is not a bill AASA would endorse at this point. AASA will be keeping a keen eye on protecting the liability provisions, although this will cause a divide in the education community, with state/district leaders calling for the protection and teachers/unions opposing the provision. AASA also will press for increasing the overall funding level, oppose any privatization and/or incentive/mandate to physically open, push for IDEA flexibility, and support dedicated funding for E-Rate and an extension of school nutrition flexibilities, among other priorities.

**Costs for Cleaning School Buildings** – As schools reopen to varying degrees during the coronavirus pandemic, the cleanliness of high-traffic, high-touch areas are a focus of concern. Cafeterias, bathrooms, hallways and buses will all have to be scrubbed regularly — and at a great expense to districts. According to June estimates from
AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO), the average school district will spend an additional $1.8 million on health and safety measures to reopen. The joint document describes an average district experiencing that cost as having “3,659 students, 8 school buildings, 183 classrooms, 329 staff members, and 40 school buses (transporting at 25% capacity, or 915 students, to comply with recommended social distancing guidelines).” Read the rest of the story: “When Schools Reopen, Extra Cleaning Will Be Essential But Expensive” (from educationdive.com, 7/22/20).

**Coronavirus Resources & Guidance...**

**PIAA Information on Fall Sports** – Last week the PIAA released information about school athletics this fall. The “Return to Competition: Individual Sport Considerations” offers guidance on how PIAA member schools may consider approaching the “Return to Competition” for high school athletics in Pennsylvania. According to the PIAA, the considerations outlined in the report “are meant to decrease potential exposure of COVID-19 to a degree that competition can occur.” The report, which drew on the expertise of the National Federation of State High School Associations, the PDE, the PA Department of Health and the PIAA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee, focuses on fall sports only (cross country, field hockey, football, golf, soccer, tennis, volleyball and water polo).

Also last week the PIAA announced it was offering flexibility to schools, leagues and/or conferences to begin contests after the first contest date for fall 2020. Recognizing that school districts will have varied approaches to their return-to-school plans, the PIAA acknowledged that, moving forward, it will remain flexible in considering that certain sports may be impacted differently and post-season play may need to be modified. The PIAA Board of Directors will meet again prior to the start of fall contests to monitor schools’ pre-season participation and any issues that may arise from the start of the fall sports season.

**Web Resources** – PASA’s web page concerning the Coronavirus and Pandemic Preparation includes links to information about issues such as school athletics and return-to-school, along with updated guidance from the PDE, CDC and USDE, and other important updates from the state and federal levels.

**Return-to-School Issues...**

**Concerns about Guidance, Liability** –

* School Leaders Looking for Support, Guidance: Pennsylvania’s existing reopening guidance for schools is too vague, and superintendents and school boards need more specifics from the state Department of Health about how to do it safely, a superintendents group said Monday following a call with Wolf administration officials. The superintendents asked for more concrete recommendations from the administration of Gov. Tom Wolf as they make decisions on how, and whether, to welcome students back to the classroom this fall, including what to do if a teacher or student tests positive for the coronavirus. “We’re going to do the best we can to keep our kids and our staff members safe, but if something happens down the line, we learn a month from now we should’ve been doing ‘X’ instead of ‘Y,’ we want it to be known that you put that decision in the hands of your local superintendent and your local school board members to make those calls, and they’re not public health experts,” said Dr. Mark DiRocco, PASA executive director, adding that local school leaders are worried about legal liability and are seeking protections. Read the rest of the story: “Pennsylvania School Leaders to State: We Need More Help” (from the Associated Press, 7/27/20).

* PASA Op-Ed: In an op-ed released to the media last week, PASA Executive Director Dr. Mark DiRocco called on state leaders to “support school districts and the 1.7 million students they educate as we move into the next phase of the pandemic.” With state officials emphasizing a need for local decision-making in school openings this fall, DiRocco said, “school officials have questioned time and again why decisions about public health have been placed in the hands of educators.” He noted the frustration of conflicting and nebulous guidance on issues such as social distancing, concerns about liability, rising costs of addressing health and safety issues in school buildings and connectivity challenges with online learning. “In the face of a nationwide pandemic, few are stepping up to acknowledge that our school districts are facing an Apollo 13-level crisis,” he said. “We’ve got hours to figure out how to get it right, or else the lunar module won’t return safely. There are few good answers, few good plans or models, unclear and conflicting guidance, and no one feels great about the start of school. Simply put, our public schools have been unintentionally set up for failure.” DiRocco concluded by calling for adequate funding, clear direction and strong support for school districts. Click here to read the op-ed.
* Changing Environment, Guidance, Attitudes*: One of the most challenging aspects of working for schools in the current environment is that just when you think you have things figured out, you are forced to pivot in a new direction. Many districts started with plans recently to completely reopen school buildings, but most now appear to be shifting to a hybrid model, according our latest EdWeek Research Center survey. And news reports show a growing number are choosing to start the school year with full-time remote learning. That decision-making curve happened all within the past month or so, amid a lot of politicking around these issues. This environment has created a pace of change that can be confusing and exhausting for educators, parents, and students. And it is prompting a shift in opinion among educators about federal, state, and local leaders; models of instruction; and mask requirements for students and educators. Read the rest of the story: “Educators Losing Confidence in Trump, DeVos, Some Governors; Support for Mask Requirements Rising” (from Education Week, 7/28/20).

**Bitmoji Classrooms** – If social media posts are any indication, Bitmoji classrooms are becoming a teacher obsession. Since so many teachers are planning to “return” only to online classrooms in the fall, they're building these colorful virtual environments for their students featuring avatar versions of themselves. In thousands of posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, teachers are sharing the classrooms they've built. Using the Bitmoji app to create their avatars, and other tools like Google or Canva to build the classroom backdrop, they're making welcoming spaces, complete with colorful rugs and posters, that can serve as a cozy home base for their classes. Students can move through the spaces virtually, clicking on a bookshelf image to get a reading assignment, for instance, or on a whiteboard to follow a link to read a science document. Read the rest of the story: “Bitmoji Classrooms: Why Teachers Are Buzzing About Them” (from Education Week, 7/30/20).

**Learning Pods and Inequity** – As schools scramble to plan for the upcoming school year, they face yet another new and vexing wrinkle: the sudden surge of interest in “learning pods.” Also called “micorschools” or “pandemic pods,” all three terms describe the phenomenon of informal groups of parents who are looking for some kind of educational continuity and child care for their children as they enter an uncertain fall. Some parents are simply looking to share costs of child care and get help with facilitating a school district’s online program. Others are seeking an educational alternative to what they see as a chaotic school year that will offer their children little in the way of traditional instruction. These groupings raise a host of questions for families and school leaders alike, chief among them: How will learning pods affect district finances and further exacerbate educational equity? Read the rest of the story: “Could the ‘Pandemic Pod’ Be a Lifeline for Parents or a Threat to Equity?” (from Education Week, 7/29/20).

**Student Assessments in 2020-21** – An assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Education said recently that his agency’s inclination is not to grant states waivers from federally mandated tests for the upcoming school year like it did in the spring. Speaking on a video call with reporters at the Education Writers Association’s National Seminar, Jim Blew, the assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy analysis, stressed the importance of testing beyond accountability. And he expressed support for a recent statement from the Council of Chief State School Officers about the importance of assessments for learning; that July 20 statement said that “even during a pandemic” assessments “serve as an important tool in our education system.” Read the rest of the story: “Top DeVos Deputy: Our ‘Instinct’ Is to Not Give States Testing Waivers Next Year” (from Education Week, 7/24/20).

**Backtracking Support for Virtual Learning** – Has Education Secretary Betsy DeVos cooled on remote learning? DeVos has recently called for school buildings across the country to fully reopen, threatened to find ways to withhold funding from schools that stick with full-time remote learning, and derided the Fairfax County district in Virginia for its plan to combine in-person and virtual instruction. For many in the education world, these comments from DeVos come as a big surprise. The secretary was an enthusiastic supporter of virtual education earlier in the pandemic—before President Donald Trump started putting pressure on school districts last month to reopen buildings and return to in-person instruction for the 2020-21 academic year. Just this spring, for example, as school buildings closed and millions of students transitioned rapidly to remote learning, DeVos praised schools’ flexibility and willingness to transition to online learning. DeVos’ Education Department then announced it would provide more than $180 million in grants to boost statewide virtual learning programs and help families access technology that’s essential for learning at home. Applications for those grants were due June 29. The department did not respond to questions from Education Week about the status of that program. Read the rest of the story: “Betsy DeVos Backtracks on Remote Learning Options She Had Championed” (from Education Week, 7/27/20).
Racial Injustice & Inequality…

**Resources: Conversations about Racial Inequality** – In light of recent events in Pennsylvania and across the country, PASA has compiled and posted a list of resources to assist school leaders and educators to facilitate conversations and initiatives addressing racial inequality in schools and communities. Click here for the list.

In the PA Legislature…

**Session Schedule** – Both the House and Senate remain in recess.

**Testimony on Return-to-School** – Dr. Jim Scanlon, superintendent of the West Chester Area SD, and Dr. John Sanville, superintendent of the Unionville-Chadds Ford SD, were among those testifying last Tuesday in West Chester during a public hearing held by the Senate Republican Policy Committee concerning a safe return to school. Both emphasized the commitment of school administrators and leaders to collaborate and develop workable solutions to provide appropriate and positive educational instruction in the current environment, but they also noted the enormous challenges facing school districts in the fall.

In his remarks, Scanlon noted the time investment for school districts to prepare for the fall, something complicated further by continually changing guidance or a lack of specific guidance. “Instead of spending the summer working through how best to implement a reopening model, we’ve had to spend the vast majority of our time on working through a public discernment process about which model to use --- knowing that we can’t operate at full capacity if we follow 6 feet,” he said. “We’ve also had to spend an enormous amount of time then explaining our decisions that are routinely criticized in an all-out social media assault. We are being forced to defend the castle from those who choose to storm it. Ultimately, there are no good decisions and each district has been literally left on its own to choose one – with no support from the state.”

In addition to the high cost of preparing for a return-to-school, the challenge of developing new education models in a short period of time, the unrealistic costs of cyber charter tuition, and concerns with liability issues, Scanlon noted that parents are divided on how schools should resume, thus complicating efforts even more. “The latest parent survey data in WACSD asked if parents preferred hybrid, cyber, or full in person education this fall. More than 8,000 parents completed the survey. 40% want hybrid, 40% want in person for all students, and 20% want cyber,” he said. “No matter what our board chooses, at least 60% of the people won’t be happy.”

Sanville also pointed to the challenge of making educational plans with ever-changing guidance. “While school leaders appreciate the efforts of the CDC, PDE, DOH and other agencies to provide support and guidance, this guidance has often been conflicting or left to localities to interpret the true meaning,” he said. “This has left local schools in the unenviable task of making public health policy decisions, which is clearly not our wheelhouse.”

He also noted the high cost of addressing the return-to-school and its impact across school districts. “We are appreciative of the efforts of the General Assembly for making education a priority in the past budget cycle – level funding in the face of significant shortfalls was noticed. We are thankful for your work in that regard,” he said. “Even with this favorable budget, I am afraid that we are in a situation where the division between the haves and the have-nots is only going to increase in the current crisis… We are lucky to have the resources to do these things – but not all districts are as fortunate.”

**Committee Schedule** – The House and Senate continue committee meetings and hearings this summer, most of them coronavirus-related.

**Monday, August 3**

**Senate Republican Policy Committee**
10:00 a.m., Monongahela Valley Hospital
*workshop discussion on the challenges facing rural hospitals*

**Senate Democratic Policy Committee**
11:00 a.m., Broadcast via Live Stream
*public hearing on responsible school re-opening*
**Tuesday, August 4**  
House Education Committee  
10:00 a.m., Room 140, Main Capitol Public  
*hearing on safely reopening schools*  
Testifying: charter schools, ARC of PA, independent schools, school nurses association  
(*livestream viewing*)

**Wednesday, August 5**  
House Education Committee  
10:00 a.m., Room 140, Main Capitol Public  
*hearing on safely reopening schools*  
Testifying: **Dr. Shane Hotchkiss**, superintendent of the Bermudian Springs SD and chairman of the PASA Legislative Committee; PSBA, PASBO and PSEA  
(*livestream viewing*)

**Tuesday, August 11**  
House Democratic Policy Committee  
2:00 p.m., Room G-50, Irvis Office Building  
*public hearing on COVID-19 testing challenges*

**Resources from our Sponsors…**

PASA is grateful for the ongoing support of our Sponsors at all levels. Although PASA does not promote or endorse any product or service offered by our sponsors, we are pleased to share information they offer that may be helpful to school leaders, particularly concerning return-to-school issues. Over the past three weeks, several of our sponsors offered free webinars and other unique opportunities to assist PASA members in planning for the next school year. A recording of several of these webinars is available on the [PASA website](#).

**On the PASA Calendar…**

- August 4......Resolutions Committee meeting (virtual; 10 a.m. - noon)  
- August 5......PASA Webinar: Actions for Eliminating Racism and Inequities in Our Schools  
- Sept. 7........PASA office closed