In Budget, Finance & Funding News…

**Act 1 Index** – The Department of Education has calculated the index for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021-2022. The index is the average of the percentage increase in the statewide average weekly wage and the Employment Cost Index. For FY 2021-2022, the base index is **3.0%**. For school districts with a market value/income aid ratio greater than 0.4000, an adjusted index will be posted on the Department's web site at www.education.pa.gov by September 30, 2020.

**Stalled Federal COVID Aid for Education** – The education community’s optimism about a big pandemic relief package from Uncle Sam has curdled into dismay and frustration. And with a presidential election and furor over a Supreme Court nomination at the top of Washington’s agenda, it’s possible that it will go bad beyond all recognition. Ever since President Donald Trump signed a coronavirus relief bill in late March in the pandemic’s earliest phase, educators warned that looming state and local K-12 budget cuts amounting to billions of dollars, along with safety concerns from school communities caused by the coronavirus, required another response and more resources that only the federal government could provide. But votes to move partisan bills [with the Senate bill focused on funding for school choice] have failed to break the logjam. Trump’s upcoming nomination of a Supreme Court justice to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg has sucked oxygen away from other Washington issues. And a close presidential election between Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden could push a new relief package further down the priority list. Read the rest of the story: “COVID-19 Education Relief: Congress Dithers and Advocates Fume” (from Education Week, 9/23/20).

**Extending General Federal Spending** – (from AASA) Last week Tuesday, the House overwhelmingly passed a revised continuing resolution (CR) (H.R. 8337) that extends government funding through December 11 because current funding expires at the end of this fiscal year on September 30. The Senate will likely vote on the bill at the start of this week, but the process could drag out until Wednesday’s deadline if Senators want to offer amendments or if Democrats protest the process due to their unhappiness over Republicans’ plans to consider a Supreme Court nomination before the inauguration in January. Importantly, the revised CR includes nearly $8 billion to extend the Department of Agriculture’s school nutrition waivers that provide the flexibility necessary for districts to safely serve meals to all students until September 2021. Moreover, this funding will also be used for the purpose of expanding and supporting the pandemic EBT program, which provides aid to SNAP eligible families. Assuming this CR is signed into law, government funding will continue until Congress reconvenes in a lame-duck session after the election. What happens then depends on whether Senate and White House control will shift to Democrats next year.

**Update to E-Rate** – (from AASA) Earlier this month, FCC Chairman Pai issued an order related to E-Rate, essentially allowing entities to reapply for additional funds until October 16. While the change does alleviate on-campus school bandwidth issues, this does NOT help address homework gap, nor does it provide any funding, flexibility or relief within the E-Rate program to allow schools to address internet needs at home during remote learning. Essentially, it will provide additional support for schools that find themselves spending more on Internet access services under existing and E-Rate approved contracts because of increased demand caused by remote learning. While schools do need this additional assistance, it does not address connecting unconnected students in their homes, nor does it allow E-Rate to be used to provide students with hotspots, devices or other connection equipment.

Guidance and Resources…

**Athletics and Spectators** – Last Monday Gov. Wolf vetoed **HB 2787**, a bill that would give to school districts the authority to determine how many athletes and spectators could attend interscholastic event either indoors or outdoors. Later in the week, the House failed to override the veto.

“This bill is entirely unnecessary,” the governor said in his veto message. “Local school governing bodies have
maintained the authority to decide how extracurricular activities, including school sports, proceed at the local level. Furthermore, to the extent COVID-19 cases may rise and spread during the fall and through the upcoming cold and flu season, the Department of Health must maintain the critical authority to limit exposure to COVID-19. Minimizing this exposure is paramount. This bill also has constitutional infirmities as it attempts to take away executive authority during the 2020-2021 school year. Instead of unnecessary legislation, we need to focus on providing schools the tools and resources they need to be successful in educating our children and we need to help people impacted by the pandemic with legislation such as funding for small businesses and child care, and paid sick leave for employees.”

Republican leaders were quick to announce they would immediately seek to override the governor’s veto. “In vetoing this bill, Gov. Wolf stands directly opposed to children and families looking for some semblance of normalcy and to receive the numerous invaluable benefits of fully participating in school sports,” said Rep. Kerry Benninghof, Majority Leader (R-Center/Mifflin). “In contradiction to his word, Gov. Wolf is once again going back on his self-proclaimed desire for educational decisions to be made at the local level.”

For that purpose, the House quickly returned to a one-day session on Wednesday to take an override vote, which requires a 2/3 approval (135 votes). However, the effort was unsuccessful, failing by a vote of 130-71.

Meanwhile, the Wolf Administration last week sought a stay of the recent federal court decision that ruled some of the governor’s orders early in the pandemic concerning masks and indoor/outdoor groups unconstitutional. The stay was denied, but the ruling has been appealed.

Currently, the statewide mask order remains in effect. School officials are urged to base decisions on indoor/outdoor events and assemblies on data, county health department information and consultation with their district solicitors and insurance providers.

**CDC Guidance** – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently issued new guidance for schools seeking to open for in-person learning, using various community infection rates and school safety thresholds to create a five-tiered color-coded risk scale. The guidance, which state education chiefs, school district superintendents, principals, teachers and others have been clamoring for since the spring, comes more than a month after millions of children, mostly across the South, returned to schools — some in districts with positive rates upward of 20% and without requirements for students and staff to wear masks. According to at least one early analysis of the CDC guidance, nearly 90% of people in the U.S. live in counties that fall into the two highest risk categories for reopening schools. The release of the guidance, which recommends aggressive thresholds, reignited a wave of criticism over the lack of federal guidance and left many wondering how many schools would have decided not to reopen for in-person learning if officials had this guidance earlier. Read the rest of the story: “CDC Guidance for Reopening Schools Creates Color-Coded Risk Scale” (from US News, 9/17/20).

**GAO Analysis of Federal Guidance** – President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos talked out of both sides of their mouths on school reopening, a new government watchdog report finds. On the one hand, DeVos stressed that plans on how to reopen school buildings during the COVID-19 pandemic were "state and local decisions." On the other hand, Trump and DeVos suggested schools' federal funding may be at risk if they don't allow students to return for in-person learning. In addition, guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about how schools should minimize the spread of the virus has been unclear and, at times, contradictory, concluded the Government Accountability Office, an independent investigative agency that reports to Congress. And when the U.S. Department of Education summarized that guidance on its website, it left out details about wearing masks and social distancing, the report says. Read the rest of the story: “Government Watchdog Finds Fault With Trump's School Reopening Push” (from Education Week, 9/22/20).

**National School Response Dashboard** – Last week a collective of national education organizations, researchers and technology experts, including AASA, unveiled the National COVID-19 School Response Dashboard, the first nationwide database that systematically maps schools’ responses to the pandemic across the United States. Data is visualized in a single dashboard that empowers school leaders, policymakers and the general public to examine current conditions in their own communities—as well as compare against other areas—to adapt to changing environments and make data-driven teaching and learning decisions as they continue to navigate the 2020-21 school year. The intent to create a national dashboard and generate initial interest among school districts was announced one month ago. Since then, hundreds of schools across the nation have joined the effort. The dashboard, created by Qualtrics, currently provides information at the state level such as school type (public,
independent, etc.), average student infection rate (based on a reported two-week period), average staff infection rate (based on a reported two-week period), whether the school is currently in-person, hybrid or fully virtual. The dashboard will be continuously updated as districts join this effort and as existing districts provide new information on details such as case count and learning model.

**Coronavirus 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.

**Racism and Equity Resources** – PASA has compiled and posted a list of resources to assist school leaders and educators to facilitate conversations and initiatives addressing racism and inequity in schools and communities. [Click here](#) for the list.

**Resources from PASA 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. Several of our sponsors have offered free webinars and other unique opportunities and resources to assist PASA members in planning for the school year. A recording of several of these webinars and a list of additional [FREE](#) resources and information is available on the [PASA website](#).

**In Legislative News…**

**Session Schedule** – The House is scheduled to be in voting session on Tuesday through Thursday this week. The Senate is in recess and is scheduled to return next week. Both chambers are scheduled to be in session only six days between now and the Nov. 3 election.

**Last Week’s Legislative Action** –

* **SB 1251**: Assessment Testing Select Committee; amended and approved by the Senate Education Committee. As introduced, the bill amends the School Code to establish the Assessment Testing Select Committee, comprised of the majority and minority chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees, to study and make findings and recommendations regarding the requirement for and administration of the testing requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 during a resurgence of the Pandemic of 2020 in the 2020-2021 school year. As amended, the bill would require the committee to report its findings and any recommendations to the secretary, the Senate and the House of Representatives no later than two weeks after the bill is enacted into law.

* **SB 1252**: Volunteer Program; amended and approved by the Senate Education Committee. The bill amends the School Code to establish the Retired Volunteer Educator Tutor Program. As amended, the bill grants to intermediate units the authority to set up the program, clarifies that districts within the I.U. are not required to participate, clarifies “school entity” to include charter schools and C/T schools, and allows for remote tutoring.

* **SB 1268**: Temporary Nurse Aids; approved by the Senate Education Committee. The bill would amend current state law to allow TNA’s hired during the declared emergency to be deemed to satisfy the requirement of completing a nurse aid training and competency evaluation program and placed on the Certified Nurse Aide Registry if they meet a certain level of training, testing and experience.

* **HB 703**: School Director Email Addresses; approved by the Senate Education Committee. The bill amends the School Code to require school districts to establish an e-mail address for each school director and post them on the school district’s publicly accessible Internet website (in a location and manner that are easily visible and accessible to the public) for use by members of the public, school district staff and students to communicate with individual school directors regarding matters of school district governance.

**This Week’s Committee and Floor Schedules** – At this point, although there are numerous committee meetings scheduled in the House this week, there are no education-related bills up for committee consideration. However, the fall session has been very fluid, and some meetings still may be scheduled. It also remains unknown if any education-related bills currently pending action on the House floor will begin moving forward. **Stay tuned…**
In State News...

**Schools as Polling Places** – The PA Department of State last week reached out to school districts via PennLink concerning polling places for November 3. Given the number of questions districts have submitted to the DOS concerning schools as polling places, DOS has provided [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQs) about the polling site process to assist school officials with deciding whether they can make school facilities available as a polling place if called upon by a county board of elections. Questions concerning a county’s election day plan for in-person voting should be directed to the county election officials. All other questions may be directed to Rachel Boss, Community Impact Manager, at rboss@pa.gov or Sindhu Ramachandran, Voting Systems Analyst, at sramaschand@pa.gov, at the Pennsylvania Department of State.

In National News...

**Continuing the Census Count** – A federal judge on September 18 ordered Trump administration officials to scrap plans to cut this year's official count short, after internal U.S. Census Bureau communications warned that a truncated schedule combined with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to "a census that is of unacceptable quality." The Census Bureau first shifted its collection schedule in response to the virus by delaying the start of the nonresponse follow-up period—when workers visit homes that haven't responded online or by mail. Officials later said they would end all data collection by Sept. 30, abbreviating the revised counting schedule by four weeks in an effort to meet statutory deadlines for assembling the population count by Dec. 31. A preliminary injunction by Judge Lucy H. Koh of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California means officials will have to keep counting until the original Oct. 31 deadline. And that may be a big deal for schools because children, immigrants, and low-income families are considered "hard-to-count populations." Districts rely on data about those demographic groups to qualify for billions of dollars in federal funding for programs like the National School Lunch Program, Title I, and Head Start. Read the rest of the story: “Judge Orders Census Bureau to Keep Counting, Here's Why That Matters for Schools.” (from Education Week, 9/25/20).

**Potential Dropout Increase** – Since 2011, the four-year high school graduation rate has been inching steadily upward, growing from 79% to 85% in 2018. But experts fear that 2020 could sharply reverse this trendline. Education leaders are predicting a sizable increase in the number of high school dropouts during the 2020-2021 school year. With more than half of school districts using hybrid or remote models, they fear struggling students will disengage from their school systems without a fully in-person option. Amid an economic crisis with high unemployment rates, more teachers report that their students are opting to work hourly jobs to help support their families. Others are taking care of siblings in lieu of stable childcare. Compounding these issues is the fact that many students still lack access to the appropriate technology to complete online schooling. Read the rest of the story: “Experts Predict A Big Increase In High School Dropouts Is On The Horizon” (from The Huffington Post, 9/18/20).

**GreatSchools Rating Revamp** – Schools that make strong progress in improving their students’ academic progress will receive a boost in their summary rating under a system rolled out this week by GreatSchools, a nonprofit schools rating and parent information website that receives millions of visits a year. The summary rating is the first number displayed on a school's GreatSchools page, with 10 being the highest score a school can receive and 1 being the lowest. The scores also have a corresponding color code, from a high-rated green down to the orange of the lowest-rated schools. Real estate websites such as Zillow and Redfin link to GreatSchools when providing information on houses and the schools that serve their areas. In addition to student progress, a school's summary rating is also derived from test scores, college readiness (when appropriate for a given school), and equity. Read the rest of the story: “GreatSchools’ Ratings Revamp Credits Schools for Boosting Academic Growth” (from Education Week, 9/24/20).

On the PASA Calendar...

Sept. 28………Webinar: Building Culture from the Inside Out
Oct. 7……….Professional Development Committee meeting (virtual)
Oct. 12-13….National Superintendent Certification Program (virtual)