Budget, Finance & Funding News…

**PSERS Contribution Rate** – Last week the PA Public School Employees’ Retirement System (PSERS) Board of Trustees certified an increase in the 2021-22 employer contribution rate and flat member contribution rates for the next three years for certain employee classification groups. The annual employer contribution rate will be 34.94% for the FY 2021-22 fiscal year, which begins on July 1, 2021. Next year’s rate is a 1.25% increase over the current FY 2020 rate of 34.51%. The increase is in line with inflation and for the fourth year in row is lower than previously projected. Additional employer contribution rate projections will be updated after PSERS conducts its five-year actuarial Experience Study. That study is expected to be completed and presented to the Board in June 2021. Total employer contributions to PSERS are estimated to be $5 billion in FY 2021. More than three quarters of the employer contribution rate is caused by the unfunded accrued liability (UAL) or past debt. As in years past, most of the employer rate payments will be applied to pay interest and principal on the debt. The Board also certified the shared-risk provision state laws (Act 120 of 2010 and Act 5 of 2017) place on some members’ contribution rates based on their hire dates. Under those laws, their contribution rates may fluctuate up or down every three years depending on a review of the Fund’s investment performance for members hired after July 1, 2011 or July 1, 2019.

**State Revenue** – According to the PA Department of Revenue, Pennsylvania collected $2.3 billion in General Fund revenue in November. Fiscal year-to-date General Fund collections total $14.8 billion. November collection data does not include a comparison against anticipated amounts because monthly revenue estimates for the fiscal year are not yet finalized.

**Proposal on COVID Funding** – The PA Senate Democratic Caucus last week unveiled a $4 billion COVID-19 relief and recovery plan that would provide resources directly to Pennsylvania families, workers, businesses, healthcare providers, educational institutions, first responders, local governments, and other entities. Known as the Pennsylvania Coronavirus Aid, Relief & Economic Security Act of 2021 (PA CARES 21), the proposal follows up on the original PA CARES plan that was developed by the Democratic Caucus in October but was not included with the Supplemental Budget adopted by the Republican-led General Assembly last month. Among the plan’s provisions for education are $250 million for basic education, $136 million for higher education, $25 million for pre-k education and $800 million for business assistance. (from a press release)

Guidance, Reports and Resources…

**State COVID Data Update** – The Pennsylvania Department of Health confirmed on December 5 that there were 12,884 additional positive cases of COVID-19, bringing the statewide total to 411,484, the highest daily increase of COVID-19 cases. For the week ending November 26, only one county (Cameron) was in the low level of transmission and the remaining 66 counties were in the substantial level of transmission.

**Attestation Forms** – The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) announced last Wednesday that over 99 percent of public school entities have submitted their attestation form to the department. PDE has contacted the remaining Local Educational Agencies (LEA) and all are anticipated to comply. PDE created the attestation form to ensure school communities are implementing mandated health, safety, and mitigation strategies when offering in-person instruction in a county with substantial levels of community transmission for two consecutive weeks. (from a press release)

**Guidance on Quarantine** –

* From the PA Department of Health: The Department of Health last week notified health care providers that, effective immediately, it has aligned its quarantine guidance for people exposed to COVID-19 with the new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that provides an option for a 10-day quarantine without testing or a seven-day quarantine with a negative test on or after day-five of quarantine. This
guidance does not apply to health care settings or those living in certain congregate settings such as nursing homes or prisons. “The incubation period for COVID-19 remains at 14 days and it is still most protective to quarantine for the full two weeks,” said Secretary of Health Rachel Levine. “However, the CDC has affirmed that quarantine can end after 10 days if the person doesn’t develop symptoms, or after seven days if the person tests negative and has no symptoms.” The recommendation for a 14-day quarantine was based on the incubation period of the virus. CDC’s intention with the option to shorten quarantine is to gain better compliance with quarantine and contact tracing activities.

* CDC Guidance: Shorter COVID-19 quarantine periods, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now recommends, could ease some of the burdens that have made in-person learning difficult for schools, but challenges remain. The new recommendations, announced Wednesday, would allow for close contacts of people diagnosed with the virus to resume normal activity after 10 days if they don't show symptoms, or as little as seven days if they test negative. The ideal quarantine period is still 14 days, but federal health officials hope that offering shorter options will encourage more people to cooperate by reducing the burden of being away from work and school for extended periods, they told reporters on a conference call. But whether or not to adopt the new recommendations is still a decision for local health authorities, CDC officials said, and potentially exposed people should still continue to monitor themselves for symptoms for the full 14-day period, even after they return to daily activities. Read the rest of the story: “CDC Shortens COVID-19 Quarantine Periods. Here's What That Means for Schools” (from Education Week, 12/2/20).

**COVID Alert App for Children** – At a press conference last week Secretary of Health Rachel Levine announced the COVID Alert PA application is now available for anyone older than 13 years old with parental agreement to its services, and will allow students to “add their phones to the fight, and help in contract tracing that occurs in their schools.” Acting Secretary of Education Sec. Noe Ortega likewise urged 13- year-old students and older to download the COVID Alert PA application to protect their family, friends and loved ones in light of increasing COVID cases, including cases in those 18 and younger. “From the start, since we put out our guidance for the type of learning models that we recommend, we always made sure that schools understood that there would be a need to pivot across the various categories depending on the transmission levels that occur,” Ortega said. “And so for many schools, they’ve come to an understanding of knowing how the path backwards and the path forward in terms of learning models would look like.”

At the same press conference, Dr. Shane Hotchkiss, superintendent of the Bermudian Springs School District, spoke about the importance of everyone in the school community working together and embracing flexibility in how education is delivered under changing circumstances. “We must continue to remain vigilant, and for Bermudian Springs, like so many other districts, we have been actively working to follow the recommendations that have been put in place,” he stated. “Our pandemic team, consisting of members of our teaching staff, our administration, operations technology staff and parents, worked in specific groups that developed the foundation of our health and safety plan…. I know we will emerge stronger and better.” (from a story on PLS, 11/30/20)

**Children and COVID Cases** – Children are less likely to catch the coronavirus than adults and tend to have less severe symptoms if they do get infected. But as more people get tested and researchers learn more about COVID-19, children’s vulnerability to the virus is becoming more apparent. A study published last Tuesday in the journal *Pediatrics* finds there have been more than a half million children diagnosed with COVID-19 as of Sept. 10, a rate of 729 cases per 100,000 children. Researchers from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association analyzed coronavirus case data from April to September from 49 state health departments as well as those of New York City, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam. (New York State does not report coronavirus cases by age.) Children under 18 make up nearly 23 percent of people in the United States, but researchers found they've so far made up only 10 percent of the more than 6.3 million cumulative U.S. cases of coronavirus. Read the rest of the story: “Children Account for More New COVID-19 Cases as the Pandemic Rolls On” (from Education Week, 12/1/20).

**PASA Resources** – PASA’s web page concerning the Coronavirus and Pandemic Preparation includes links to information about COVID-related issues, along with updated guidance from the PDE, CDC and USDE, and other important updates from the state and federal levels. In addition, 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. PASA 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…

**Veto of Limited Liability Bill** – Last week Gov. Wolf formally vetoed HB 1737, a bill that would have extended limited liability protections to health care providers, schools, businesses and others who followed COVID-19 public health directives. The governor’s veto message did not reference schools, but rather focused on extending such protections to businesses.

“This legislation provides broad, overreaching immunity from civil liability during the current pandemic,” the message stated. “I support, and provided, protections against liability for emergency and disaster services activities taken by health care practitioners under my May 6, 2020, executive order. However, this bill significantly expands these protections by limiting liability to various entities, including manufacturers, distributors, labelers and users of personal protective equipment, business services and covered providers. Shielding entities from liability in such a broad fashion as provided under this bill invites the potential for carelessness and a disregard for public safety.

“Furthermore, COVID-19 immunity protections need to be paired with worker protections, including paid sick leave for employees. Providing immunity for a business that does not rigorously comply with public health orders does not ensure the safety of the public, its employees and is not in the public interest. At a time when the COVID-19 virus is spreading rapidly, we need to be taking measures to ensure compliance with public health orders and improve safety practices. We should not be providing protection for noncompliance or carelessness.”

PASA is asking the governor to use an executive order to extend limited liability protection to schools, in light of the HB 1737 veto. “We’re very concerned about litigation coming down the road,” said PASA Executive Director Dr. Mark DiRocco.

In State News…

**School Performance Data** – Last Week Acting PA Secretary of Education Noe Ortega signed an Order that continues flexibility from school year 2019-20 by waiving the requirement to include performance data in professional employee ratings, as authorized by the recent passage of SB 1216 in law (Act 136 of 2020).

In National News…

**The Future of School Meals** – Hundreds of American school districts that qualify for that USDA program, called the Community Eligibility Provision, don’t join it, largely due to cost concerns. Reimbursement rates to school districts are based on the percentage of students receiving social supports, and districts close to the 40 percent cutoff may end up spending more than they otherwise would. Today, though, nearly every school in the country can hand out meals for free, thanks to the emergency extension of a USDA school food program meant to provide no-cost meals to kids during the summer. After months of uncertainty, the USDA announced on Oct. 9 that the expansion would last until the end of the school year. The reprieve highlights an emergent truth: Schools feed America’s children. And the pandemic has forced schools toward providing free food to all students, long the dream of those fighting child hunger. Read the rest of the story: “Coronavirus means school food is free across the U.S. What if it stayed that way?” (from The Hechinger Report, 11/24/20).

**School Board Training** – The more collaborative and productive a superintendent-school board relationship is, the more efficiently a school system runs. Yet the superintendent-school board relationship is often fraught, marked by conflict, attempts at micromanagement, and single-issue politics. Overwhelmingly white, well educated, and middle-income, school board members also may face an upward climb to understand the needs of the entire district, apart from the geographic subdivisions they come from. What can school district leaders do to ensure a quick transition and a smooth relationship for their school board members? Plenty, according to educators and experts, and a special report from Education Week highlights some of those strategies, from broad community training to interest new candidates in the job and governance approaches to guard against micromanagement. The report also
includes advice from school board members to their newly elected peers and results from a Education Research Center poll of school board members nationwide. Click here for the report. Subscription may be required.

Changes at the FCC – Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai announced last Monday that he will be stepping down from his role at the end of President Donald Trump’s term on Jan. 20, 2021. Education advocates are not sorry to see him go. The FCC oversees the E-rate program, which helps schools and libraries obtain affordable broadband. And it is more important than ever, now that thousands of schools across the country are operating partially or fully remote to avoid spreading the coronavirus. Education advocates have been clamoring for additional support for the E-Rate, including to help school districts expand broadband access for teachers and students who might not have a stable connection—or any connection—at home. But Pai, a Republican who was elevated to the helm of the commission by Trump, hasn't taken steps to make that happen, even in the midst of unprecedented need. Read the rest of the story: “Dawn of an Education-Friendly FCC? Chairman Ajit Pai Moving On” (from Education Week, 11/30/20).

Across the Nation...

Kentucky: Private Schools and Closure Orders – A Kentucky religious school has asked the U.S. Supreme Court for emergency relief from a state order that has closed all public and private K-12 schools in the state for in-person instruction amid the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Danville Christian Academy, a 234-student pre-K-12 school in central Kentucky, is seeking to undo a ruling issued on Nov. 29 by a panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit, in Cincinnati. The appellate court lifted an injunction that a federal district court had issued against Gov. Andrew G. Beshear's Nov. 18 closure order. How that case will fare in the high court is unknown. However, the recent 5-4 Supreme Court ruling in Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y. v. Cuomo, which overturned a state order against large gatherings, specifically those in churches, demonstrated the significance of new Justice Amy Coney Barrett's replacement of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In the spring, the high court had declined relief from state limits to churches in California and Nevada. The vote in the California case was 5-4 with Ginsburg in the majority. But the high court has yet to address the issue of state orders closing schools. Read the rest of the story: “Kentucky Religious School Asks U.S. Supreme Court to Block State Closure Order” (from Education Week, 12/2/20).

On the PASA Calendar...

Dec. 14-15…..PASA/PASBO School Construction Workshop
Dec. 17………..Superintendent Virtual Session: What’s Next?
Jan. 6………………Winter Webinar Series #1
Jan. 7…………Superintendent Forum: Leading in a Culture of Change