**The PASA office will be closed from Dec. 24 – Jan. 1 for the holidays. The next Update will be published on Jan. 4.**

**Budget, Finance & Funding News…**

**Federal Budget, COVID-Relief Bills** – After days of tense negotiations and months of partisan stalemate, congressional leaders announced Sunday night that they have secured a deal for a sweeping $900 billion rescue package to deliver much-needed relief for small businesses, unemployed Americans and health care workers while bolstering vaccine distribution. The full details of what will be in the relief package have yet to be released. But the package is expected to include a $600 direct stimulus payment for Americans under a certain income level, along with many other programs aimed at helping the economic fallout of the pandemic. In addition, sources indicate it will include $82 billion for education providers like schools and colleges, including aid to help reopen classrooms safely, $7 billion to bolster broadband access to help Americans connect remotely during the pandemic, and increases for SNAP benefits and childhood nutrition programs. It appears the final deal does not contain any direct aid to state and local governments.

Also, yesterday the House passed a one-day government funding bill to avoid a government shutdown at midnight, and the Senate then passed the continuing resolution. Pres. Trump signed it shortly before midnight, buying Congress 24 hours before the next deadline. The House will vote today on the final COVID relief package along with the $1.4 trillion omnibus spending bill for a new fiscal year, according to House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, who relayed that message to Democrats on a caucus call, sources said. (from a story on CNN.com, 12/20/20)

**Audits of Cyber Charter Schools** – Pennsylvania cyber charter schools could receive more than $1 billion in taxpayer money this year with little oversight, as the state fails to conduct required financial audits, a investigation by the Sunday Times, a Times-Shamrock newspaper, found. Meanwhile, the 14 cyber schools spent at least $12.7 million on advertising and marketing last year — with some schools spending nearly $1,000 per student to convince others to enroll. And it’s working. As cyber charter school rosters grow faster than ever expected prior to the coronavirus pandemic, local educators and some state leaders have strengthened their calls for reform and transparency. Seven of the state’s 14 cyber charter schools have never had their finances reviewed by the auditor general, the newspaper found. The office has audited just two schools in the last five years. It last audited the largest cyber school in the state, Commonwealth Charter Academy based in Harrisburg — with a budget that could top $270 million in 2021 — nearly nine years ago. Read the rest of the story: “[As Cyber Charter School Costs Soar, State Fails to Conduct Required Audits](https://www.hazletonstandard.com/news/2020/12/20/Audits%20of%20Cyber%20Charter%20Schools%20-%20Pennsylvania%20cyber%20charter%20schools%20could%20receive%20more%20than%20%241%20billion%20in%20taxpayer%20money%20this%20year%20with%20little%20oversight%2C%20as%20the%20state%20fails%20to%20conduct%20required%20financial%20audits%2C%20a%20investigation%20by%20the%20Sunday%20Times%2C%20a%20Times-Shamrock%20newspaper%2C%20found.%20Meanwhile%2C%20the%2014%20cyber%20schools%20spent%20at%20least%20%2412.7%20million%20on%20advertising%20and%20marketing%20last%20year%20—%20with%20some%20schools%20spending%20nearly%20%241%2C000%20per%20student%20to%20convince%20others%20to%20enroll.%20And%20it%27s%20working.%20As%20cyber%20charter%20school%20rosters%20grow%20faster%20than%20ever%20expected%20prior%20to%20the%20coronavirus%20pandemic%2C%20local%20educators%20and%20some%20state%20leaders%20have%20strengthened%20their%20calls%20for%20reform%20and%20transparency.%20Seven%20of%20the%20state%27s%2014%20cyber%20charter%20schools%20have%20never%20had%20their%20finances%20reviewed%20by%20the%20auditor%20general%2C%20the%20newspaper%20found.%20The%20office%20has%20audited%20just%20two%20schools%20in%20the%20last%20five%20years.%20It%20last%20audited%20the%20largest%20cyber%20school%20in%20the%20state%2C%20Commonwealth%20Charter%20Academy%20based%20in%20Harrisburg%20—%20with%20a%20budget%20that%20could%20top%20%24270%20million%20in%202021%20—%20nearly%20nine%20years%20ago.%20Read%20the%20rest%20of%20the%20story%3A%20%22As%20Cyber%20Charter%20School%20Costs%20Soar%2C%20State%20Fails%20to%20Conduct%20Required%20Audits%22%20(from%20The%20Hazleton%20Standard%20Speaker%2C%2012/20/20).](https://www.hazletonstandard.com/news/2020/12/20/Audits%20of%20Cyber%20Charter%20Schools%20%20%20%3A%20%20Pennsylvania%20cyber%20charter%20schools%20could%20receive%20more%20than%20%241%20billion%20in%20taxpayer%20money%20this%20year%20with%20little%20oversight%2C%20as%20the%20state%20fails%20to%20conduct%20required%20financial%20audits%2C%20a%20investigation%20by%20the%20Sunday%20Times%2C%20a%20Times-Shamrock%20newspaper%2C%20found.%20Meanwhile%2C%20the%2014%20cyber%20schools%20spent%20at%20least%20%2412.7%20million%20on%20advertising%20and%20marketing%20last%20year%20—%20with%20some%20schools%20spending%20nearly%20%241%2C000%20per%20student%20to%20convince%20others%20to%20enroll.%20And%20it%27s%20working.%20As%20cyber%20charter%20school%20rosters%20grow%20faster%20than%20ever%20expected%20prior%20to%20the%20coronavirus%20pandemic%2C%20local%20educators%20and%20some%20state%20leaders%20have%20strengthened%20their%20calls%20for%20reform%20and%20transparency.%20Seven%20of%20the%20state%27s%2014%20cyber%20charter%20schools%20have%20never%20had%20their%20finances%20reviewed%20by%20the%20auditor%20general%2C%20the%20newspaper%20found.%20The%20office%20has%20audited%20just%20two%20schools%20in%20the%20last%20five%20years.%20It%20last%20audited%20the%20largest%20cyber%20school%20in%20the%20state%2C%20Commonwealth%20Charter%20Academy%20based%20in%20Harrisburg%20—%20with%20a%20budget%20that%20could%20top%20%24270%20million%20in%202021%20—%20nearly%20nine%20years%20ago.%20Read%20the%20rest%20of%20the%20story%3A%20%22As%20Cyber%20Charter%20School%20Costs%20Soar%2C%20State%20Fails%20to%20Conduct%20Required%20Audits%22%20(from%20The%20Hazleton%20Standard%20Speaker%2C%2012/20/20).)**

**Guidance, Reports and Resources…**

**COVID Vaccine and Schools** –

*School Employees as Frontline Workers:* School employees should be included among “frontline essential workers” who are vaccinated against COVID-19 in the next phase of state campaigns, a federal panel recommended Sunday. State plans vary, and it’s ultimately up to governors to determine how closely they follow federal guidelines. But the Sunday vote, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices notably departed from a previous, tentative timeline by creating a narrower classification of about 30 million frontline workers, who are “in sectors essential to the functioning of society and are at substantially higher risk of exposure” because they work directly with the public. The panel included teachers and school support staff in that category alongside workers in other sectors, like firefighters, police officers, grocery store employees, and postal workers. A previous timeline included school employees with a broader “essential worker group,” which is an expansive definition set by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Groups representing a variety of economic sectors, including some without frequent interaction with the public, have lobbied to be prioritized as part of that group. (from *Education Week*, 12/20/20)
* The Vaccine and PA Schools: With one COVID-19 vaccine now in emergency use — and potentially more to follow — Pennsylvania’s weary teachers, parents, and students can see a path back towards normalcy. A vaccine, if effective, could make in-person schooling substantially safer and lead to thousands of children reentering classrooms for the first time since mid-March. But that hope is far from certainty. There are many unanswered questions about timing, compliance, and safety. Keystone Crossroads canvassed experts to better understand what the latest vaccine news means for education. Read the rest of the story: “The COVID Vaccine Is Here – What Does That Mean for Pa. Schools?” (from WHYY, 12/15/20).

The Future of Online Learning – When the pandemic is over, there’s at least one thing that’s likely to stick around in many K-12 schools: online learning. Twenty percent of district and charter management organizations said in a new survey that they had started or were planning a virtual school or fully remote option this academic year and expected those options would remain after the pandemic. Another 10 percent said the same about hybrid or blended learning, while 7 percent said some lesser version of remote learning will continue when the pandemic is in the rearview mirror. Those are among the findings from a new survey of leaders of nearly 300 traditional school districts and charter management organizations that was released by the Rand Corporation on Tuesday. The survey also revealed that school system leaders had major anxiety about their ability to address students’ emotional well-being and mental health as well as concerns about disparities in the opportunities students have to access schooling, especially among leaders running systems where at least half the enrollment are eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals or are Black and Hispanic. Read the rest of the story: “Remote Learning Will Keep a Strong Foothold Even After the Pandemic, Survey Finds” (from Education Week, 12/15/20).

School Costs for COVID Strategies – Strategies to help schools minimize the risk of coronavirus transmission would on average cost between $55 and $442 per student, depending on what measures are used, according to a report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Dec. 11. The cost estimates of COVID-19 mitigation strategies cover a range of expenses for K-12 public schools. These include no-touch thermometers, student desk shields, and face shields for school staff. Hiring additional custodians is also factored into the estimates. The $55 per-student estimate would cover only materials and “consumables” (think hand sanitizer), while the $442 estimate covers those costs, but also more staff and transportation costs. Read the rest of the story: “CDC: Here’s How Much It Would Cost Schools to Safeguard Against COVID-19” (from Education Week, 12/11/20).

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…

Session Update – Both the House and Senate return to Harrisburg on January 7 to swear in new members and officially begin the 2021-22 legislative session.

FYI: General Assembly Demographics – Since 2010, both chambers of the General Assembly have seen historic turnover; over 75% of the House and nearly 70% of the Senate have a decade or less experience. The House and Senate Republicans have been enjoying comfortable majorities over the last decade. Democrats in both chambers have been trying to close the gap since the low water mark of 2016. While Democrats have been unsuccessful in that goal, it is important to remember that the 2021-2022 legislative session will trigger the legislative reapportionment commission. The majority of the Democratic pickups and retentions have been in the southeastern part of the state while the Republicans have made gains in western Pennsylvania. The population changes in these areas will likely impact the new maps and consequently, the subsequent elections. (analysis provided by Milliron Goodman Government Relations LLC)
In State News...

Deadline for FBI Clearances – Last week the Department of Human Services (DHS) issued a final reminder to people needing Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) criminal history background checks as a condition of employment to obtain this clearance ahead of the December 31 deadline.

Earlier this year, Governor Wolf signed Act 18 of 2020, which extended the time period for certain professions required by the Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) to obtain an FBI background check upon hiring. Under Act 18 of 2020, some individuals who are required to obtain an FBI background check were given additional time to meet this requirement because of closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. New hires and individuals seeking a renewal of the FBI Criminal History Background Check have until December 31, 2020 to obtain the check. All individuals required to obtain additional clearances, including the Pennsylvania State Police Criminal Record Check and the Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance, must still obtain these clearances prior to employment. Both of these clearances can be obtained online.

In order to receive an FBI background check, fingerprints must be submitted as part of the criminal history check. Fingerprint scans can be taken at an IdentoGO location in the commonwealth. Many IdentoGO locations were temporarily closed in the spring, creating challenges for people still trying to meet the fingerprinting requirement. An extension on the FBI clearance requirement was passed to accommodate workers during this challenge, and since then the majority of IdentoGo locations have reopened. Required clearances must be obtained by December 31 for workers to remain in compliance.

A map of all open IdentoGO locations is available [here](#), and this map is updated as new offices begin to reopen. Anyone seeking fingerprinting services should call IDEMIA’s customer service at 844-321-2101 to ensure the location is still operating, schedule an appointment, and discuss necessary COVID-19 safety precautions. If employers have a large number of employees needing new or renewed clearances, arrangements can be made to have fingerprinting occur at the workplace. Mobile fingerprinting services are available for an additional fee through IDEMIA for groups of 20 or more needing clearances. Agencies with this need should contact IDEMIA to schedule.

Act 18 of 2020 applies to individuals who must get their FBI Criminal History Background Check prior to beginning employment as found in Section 6344 of the CPSL and those individuals required by Section 6344.4 of the CPSL that are due to have their fingerprint checks renewed. The law does not extend the fingerprinting and background check requirement for new volunteers under the CPSL, public school employees prior to employment, and others required to receive FBI background checks under different departments.

For more information on clearances necessary to work with children, visit [www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov](http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov).

Proposed Amendments to Chapter 49 – The State Board of Education’s proposed rulemaking #6-346, containing proposed amendments to Chapter 49 (Certification of Professional Personnel), has been published in the Pennsylvania Bulletin on December 19, and the Board is now accepting written comments on the proposed rulemaking for 30 days (until January 19).

The regulation makes changes to Chapter 49 concerning teacher preparation, induction and professional development as follows:

* Pre-service Teachers: adds requirements for instruction for preservice educators which would be delivered as part of undergraduate or alternative post-baccalaureate programs for individuals who are working toward earning a teaching certificate. Individuals studying to become teachers would need to complete instruction in professional ethics, structured literacy, and CR-SE, which is inclusive of mental wellness, trauma-informed instruction, cultural awareness, and technological and virtual engagement.
* New Teachers: adds requirements for training as newly-employed teachers enter the profession. Induction programs would make supports available for at least the first two (2) years of an educator’s career. The proposal also would require induction programs for newly-employed educators to include training in CR-SE, as described previously, and in professional ethics.
* Current Teachers: would require that continuing professional education for current educators include training in CR-SE, structured literacy and professional ethics.

[Click here](#) to read the proposal and summary. Comments should be submitted to the State Board of Education,
Opportunity for Students: Innovations Challenge – The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) last week announced that the deadline for the fourth annual Innovations Challenge has been extended through Friday, January 15, 2021. Students in grades 9-12 regardless of their school’s learning model are invited participate in this year’s Innovations Challenge, which encourages students to use their problem-solving, creative and strategic-thinking abilities to solve real-world transportation challenges in a competition among their peers. This year’s Innovations Challenge asks students to develop an innovative and implementable solution that helps address Pennsylvania’s transportation revenue shortfall by identifying potential new funding streams, aside from additional gas taxes, tolls or mileage-based user fees, to help ensure adequate transportation funding for the future. The Innovations Challenge aims to not only help students explore real transportation challenges that PennDOT is facing, but also open their minds to the very real possibility of working for PennDOT after graduation. Regional Innovations Challenge winners will be selected and invited to compete for the state championship. The Transportation Policy and Education Foundation, an educational arm of the Associated Pennsylvania Constructors (APC), the American Council of Engineering Companies of PA (ACEC/PA) and the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA) are providing a combined total award of $5,500 to be divided among the first, second and third place statewide winning teams. For complete Innovations Challenge details, visit www.penndot.gov/innovation.

In National News…

Transgender Student Case – The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to take up the appeal of a group of parents and students who objected to an Oregon school district’s policy of allowing transgender students to use restrooms, locker rooms, and showers matching their gender identity. Read the rest of the story: “High Court Declines Challenge to District Policy Protecting Transgender Students” (from Education Week, 12/15/20).

Campaign to Keep Snow Days – In one of the most frightening winters in recent memory, when coronavirus is killing thousands, and millions of children are barred from their classrooms, struggling for enough internet to learn, Campbell’s Soup made a decision. It would fight, in its cozy way, for kids’ right to take a day off. But the iconic food company’s “Save the Snow Day” campaign, launched this month, isn’t finding a universally warm-and-fuzzy reception with its intended audiences: parents, and the K-12 leaders who make snow-day decisions. “Nice try, but protecting snow days is not even close to the top of our priority list right now,” said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents 76 of the country’s largest urban school systems. He’d much rather see big corporations help districts get universal high-speed broadband so teachers can consistently reach their students. Read the rest of the story: “What Happened When Campbell’s Soup Tried to ‘Save the Snow Day’” (from Education Week, 12/12/20).

On the PASA Calendar…

Jan. 6………..Winter Webinar Series #1
Jan. 7………..Superintendent Forum: Leading in a Culture of Change
Jan. 13………..National Superintendent Certification Program (virtual)
Jan. 15………..Aspiring to Leadership Workshop (virtual)