

The Public School Forum's Friday Report

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Budget Concerns Deepen; Governor Taking Steps to Respond

Thursday's announcement that North Carolina's unemployment rate jumped from 8.1 percent to 9.7 in January underscored the growing concerns about the state's deepening budget deficit. A 9.7 unemployment rate is the highest in over a quarter of a century and economists predict it could rise to between 11 and 14 percent in coming months.

Those predictions came at the same time State Budget Director Charlie Perusse briefed reporters and others on the latest declines in state revenue collections. Perusse said the state could be confronted with a \$2.2 billion shortfall for this fiscal year. If the shortfall reaches that level it would be over 10% lower than anticipated. Worse, at current spending rates, the deficit for 2009-2010 could be as high as \$3.4 billion.

The Governor's Office is taking steps to meet the budget shortfall. Last week, the Governor ordered lottery revenue earmarked for school construction to be diverted to the General Fund. This Wednesday, the Governor's Office announced that it would use \$250 million of the state's "rainy day fund" to shore up the state employees' health plan. In addition, Governor Perdue announced that she would "seize" the balance of the rainy day fund, now valued at \$787 million, to be potentially used to meet the state deficit. That announcement received mixed reviews by legislative leaders. The rainy day fund exists to meet unanticipated emergency needs, primarily hurricane relief.

Meanwhile, Governor Perdue was not the only lawmaker looking for ways to close the budget gap. Bills have been introduced in both the House and Senate that would divert the \$70 million per year scheduled to go to the Golden Leaf Foundation to the general revenue fund. The Golden Leaf Foundation was created as a way to revitalize tobacco-dependent communities. Its funding comes as part of the national settlement with cigarette manufacturers. The Foundation's assets exceeded \$700 million prior to the recent economic downturn; however, it has shrunk to slightly over \$400 million as a result of investment losses. One of the proposed bills would end any additional income coming to the Foundation; the other bill would end future contributions for three years.

On Monday and Tuesday lawmakers will be receiving the Governor's proposed budget for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 years. It is widely anticipated that there will be deep program cuts throughout state government. Less clear is whether the proposed budget will include proposed tax hikes designed to bolster declining state revenues.

The only bright spot in the current budget picture is the relief that will come from the federal stimulus bill. In an ordinary year North Carolina's share of the stimulus package would have provided a real windfall to the state. However, as unemployment continues to rise and state revenue collection continues to decline, the stimulus package will simply lessen today's budget situation, not begin to solve it. More on the budget in next week's *Friday Report*.

Legislative News...

House Ed Committee Votes on Sex Education

On Tuesday, the House Education Committee approved a measure that would allow parents to select whether their child's sex education curriculum is comprehensive or focuses on abstinence only. The committee voted 32-21 along party lines to approve HB 88, requiring the two-track system for sex education in grades seven through nine. The current law allows school districts to offer comprehensive sex education, but only after a lengthy process that includes public hearings. Only about a dozen of the state's 115 school districts have adopted the broader sex education curriculum.

The proposed legislation would allow parents or guardians to choose for their children the abstinence-only curriculum, or the comprehensive sex education course. If parents make no choice, their children would be placed in the comprehensive sex education curriculum.

House and Senate File Anti-bullying Bills

An anti-bullying bill filed in the House this week is primarily aimed at promoting safety in schools. "A third of the students nationwide report being bullied and an estimated 160,000 children skip school every day to avoid bullying, and that can no longer continue to exist in the state of North Carolina," said Rep. Rick Glazier, D-Cumberland and a sponsor of the legislation. The measure, called the "School Violence Protection Act," (HB 548) would require all 115 public school systems to implement policies prohibiting bullying, create procedures for reporting and investigating bullying complaints and punish students who bully other students or school employees.

Representative Glazier tried to advance a similar bill in the 2007-08 legislative session, but it failed amid controversy over whether the law should specify that bullies should not target students based on sexual orientation. The Senate filed a similar bill this week, sponsored by Senator Boseman, D- New Hanover. Both bills have been sent to their respective Committee on Education.

National News...

National Standards Gain Support

Support for the development of national standards increased recently as the nation's governors, many education leaders, and the U.S. secretary of education endorsed the idea that the nation should set a common definition of what students should know and be able to do. The National Governors Association adopted a policy statement at the end of February that endorses the development of common academic standards by comparing student performance on international tests.

National Standards Gain Support (cont'd.)

The NGA statement stemmed from the report “Benchmarking for Success,” released in December by the NGA, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, a nonprofit group organized by governors and business leaders that seeks to improve the quality of schools through more-rigorous standards. The combined effort will supplement Achieve’s ongoing work with the American Diploma Project, which works with states to develop policies to better prepare students for postsecondary education.

Although support is growing, creating and implementing national standards will be difficult. Congress is not on record for supporting such a proposal, and educators disagree over what skills to emphasize. Defining content standards will be done through state and local governments, not by the federal government. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan feels the federal government should be a “catalyst” for national standards development, supporting the NGA and other groups working to set them.

Proposals for standards are gathering more support than previous attempts to nationalize standards and testing. They have emerged, in part, because state standards under the NCLB law set inconsistent goals for reading and math. Some educators argue common standards would be a step toward nationalizing school policy and usurping teachers’ judgment of what to teach and how to teach it. Governors argue that standards should be developed to help improve students’ academic performance, and thus ensure the nation’s economic success.

The full report, “Benchmarking for Success,” can be viewed at <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0812BENCHMARKING.PDF>. More about the American Diploma Project can be viewed at <http://www.achieve.org/ADPNetwork>.

Iowa Rejects Four-Day School Weeks

The Iowa Department of Education has decided to turn down a school district's request for a four-day week. Officials from the central Iowa district of Bondurant-Farrar were the first in the state to request an exemption from the five-day school weeks for the 2010-2011 school year. The district’s plan was to help cover a \$1.3 million budget deficit and offer more time for teacher training.

Del Hoover, the deputy division administrator for the Department of Education, said Bondurant-Farrar officials did not provide enough evidence to show that the reduction in school days would positively benefit students and their learning. State education officials "had enough questions that they said 'No.'"

The plan, proposed to the Department of Education in January, had already been abandoned by district officials because of parental concerns and the results of a survey on the topic, according to Bondurant-Farrar superintendent Peggy Vint. Vint said school officials also were unable to determine what kind of effect such a move would have had on student learning.

Oklahoma to Use Stimulus Money for 'Real Reform'

Oklahoma will receive \$287 million from the economic stimulus package to fund programs from pre-kindergarten through secondary education. Oklahoma State Superintendent Sandy Garrett announced last week that the funds will be used for "real reform" such as early childhood education expansion, longer school days for at-risk urban districts and an extended school year for others.

"It is the first time our state has had this kind of resources, has had enough to really make a difference in some of our schools, our low-performing schools in particular," Garrett said.

Because Oklahoma hasn't experienced some of the more serious effects of the national economic problems as other states have, it will be able to use the stimulus money to push reforms. The Obama Administration will expect results, transparency, and accountability, and Federal officials are expected to provide guidance on the new money next week. Garrett believes the money could be available in Oklahoma within 45 days.

Oklahoma schools may also see some of the \$578 million the state is expected to receive from the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. States will have somewhat more flexibility in how this money may be spent, and Superintendent Garrett and Governor Brad Henry have already begun discussing areas where that money might go, such as the governor's own initiatives: online testing and a data system designed to show what works in Oklahoma schools.

Newly Jobless May Fill Vacancies in Arkansas Schools

College-educated workers who have lost their jobs in business and industry may be in luck as the Arkansas Department of Education works to tap into this pool of displaced workers to fill teaching positions. Education Department staff members are working fill teaching jobs, particularly in the high-demand subjects of mathematics, life sciences, physical sciences, foreign languages, speech, art and music.

"We see this as an opportunity to tap into career changers, those lifelong learners, who have work experience to bring into the classroom for us," said Beverly Williams, the Education Department's assistant commissioner for human resources.

The Education Department's Office of Teacher Quality is trying to get word to some 10,000-plus affected individuals about teaching careers through local and state news media and billboards. Agency employees will work with laid-off employees to inform potential teacher candidates about how to get state teacher licenses and find teaching jobs. The state license is required in order to teach in public schools.

Teaching Fellows Program Launches New Alumni Site

The North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program is proud to announce the recent development and launch of the Alumni section of its website at www.teachingfellows.org.

This site will prompt Alumni to create a user account on their first visit. Once they have created an online account and profile they will be able to view the Bulletin Board section which has information about upcoming events and volunteer opportunities with the Program. They will also be able to post and read messages on the Message Forum. The site features a search option which will allow Alumni to locate long lost friends.

All Teaching Fellows Alumni are cordially invited to begin using the site. For any questions or comment please contact Melissa Rains at mrains@ncforum.org or Danny Bland at dbland@ncforum.org.

NC EPFP Fellows Hear from NC Treasure

This week EPFP fellows had the opportunity to hear from Holocaust survivor Mrs. Gizella Abramson. Abramson was a young girl when the Nazis invaded Poland, where she and her family lived. Her families escaped the camps for a time, but ultimately were split up by circumstances and she ended up in Majdanek, a death camp in Poland.

Mrs. Abramson shared her experiences with fellows, remembering the chills associated with the events of her childhood. "All of us had to wear yellow patches on our chests and backs. We were no longer human beings, we were yellow patches. And you can cut up a yellow patch." As she closed with, "I do this because I love this country," fellows shared their gratitude for the time they got to spend listening to Mrs. A's stories.

The 2008-09 class will complete its 10-month weekly seminar sessions on May 12. The class' graduation will be held this fall at the Cardinal Club in downtown Raleigh. Coordinators Jo Ann Norris and Kendall Jordan are now taking applications for the 2009-10 class. If you are interested, contact either coordinator by calling 781-6833, or email them at jnorris@ncforum.org (Jo Ann Norris) or kjordan@ncforum.org (Kendall Jordan). The application period will close once twenty-five Fellows have been accepted. The program will begin mid-September 2009. Meeting every Tuesday night from 5:30 to 8:30 pm, the program will end mid-May 2010.

NC CAP SYNERGY 2009 Conference

The North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs (NC CAP) is pleased to announce the upcoming the statewide afterschool SYNERGY Conference, scheduled for April 29 – May 1, 2009, at the Koury Center in Greensboro. The event will feature over 30 workshops, 20 vendors, networking receptions, and Pre-Conference opportunities on curriculum training and building effective partnerships with businesses.

NC CAP extends a special invitation to elected officials to attend a youth-led Forum on Afterschool from 4:15 pm - 6:15 pm on April 30. Youth leaders will share their perspectives on the importance of high quality afterschool programs. The event is meant to foster dialogue between afterschool providers, community leaders, parents and others on the issues surrounding quality afterschool care.

SYNERGY is held in collaboration with the NC Department of Public Instruction, NC Department of Health and Human Services, NC Department of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, Support Our Students Program, Boys & Girls Clubs, NCSU 4-H Youth Development, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

For more information, or to register for the Youth Forum, visit: www.nccap.net/about/conference.cfm or contact Katie Biggerstaff at 919-781-6833 x132.

2008 Local Finance Study is Here!

The Public School Forum's annual Local Finance Study is available for order. This study has become the "last word" in county expenditures on schools. The study annually ranks North Carolina's 100 counties on their actual spending on schools as well as the effort they make in supporting schools. School boards, finance officers, and county commissioners routinely rely on the Forum's annual study as budget decisions are made.

"The Public School Forum's annual finance study has been in many respects the keystone for school financial reform since its first publication, twenty years ago. It emerged when the state first confronted the reality of local school funding inequity and has proven to be the essential benchmark for progress in pursuing equal educational opportunities at least from the funding perspective. It was critically important in the justification for additional funding for low wealth and small schools." – Jim Barber; Senior Education Advisor, UNC Chapel Hill School of Education.

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