



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony
Senate Education Committee

Public Hearing on SB1000
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Acting Secretary of Education
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Good afternoon. Thank you Chairman Folmer, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee for the opportunity to speak today on SB 1000 and the issue of community college access in rural areas. I would also like to thank the President Pro Tempore, Senator Scarnati, for his interest and leadership on this important issue.

My name is Carolyn Dumaresq and I am the acting Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). With me today is Jill Hans, who is the Deputy Secretary of the Office of Postsecondary/Higher Education.

Providing students with access to affordable postsecondary education and training opportunities is a priority for the Corbett Administration, particularly in the Commonwealth's rural areas. The Commonwealth's employers rely on a supply of skilled workers to maintain and grow their businesses and support the Commonwealth's economic growth. If students do not have access to quality, affordable education and training, they cannot become the employees the Commonwealth's employers need and Pennsylvania's economy demands.

Pennsylvania is fortunate to have one of the most diverse and robust postsecondary education systems in the nation. Our system includes private licensed schools, community colleges, community education councils, public and private four-year institutions, and other entities all working together to meet the needs of businesses, students and taxpayers. Each sector provides unique and important choices that allow students to pursue postsecondary education and training, providing our next generation with quality opportunities in a constantly changing environment.

The decision to add another entity to the existing array of institutions is a significant one which should be actively studied and reviewed. The department appreciates the opportunity to be part of this process and offers the following as a guide for this discussion:

Need

The department recommends a thorough review of the 2011 study completed by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to determine if the solution proposed in SB 1000 is the appropriate solution and to better understand how the new entity will be integrated within the existing postsecondary education options in the Commonwealth. The Governor's Advisory Commission on Postsecondary Education spent time studying this issue and determined that there were opportunities among postsecondary education institutions to collaborate and integrate services for the benefit of students.

Specifically, the commission recommended that efforts in this area avoid the duplication of services while still reaching out to underserved areas, such as the rural areas of the Commonwealth. Therefore, the department also recommends that a comprehensive review be completed of the services that are currently provided by existing entities with further analysis of new instructional methods. This review will be useful in determining if the current services can be expanded to increase accessibility for students before a new entity is established.

Funding

The financial requirements for a new entity, including operating and capital costs, should be estimated in detail and funding sources identified. Financial stability of the new entity is critical

to ensure that taxpayer resources are used appropriately and that the entity is sustainable, both for the workers that are employed and the students who are enrolled.

Community colleges in Pennsylvania are funded based on a cost-sharing model as prescribed in Article XIX-A of the Public School Code. It is not clear if the proposed regional community college pilot will follow this cost-sharing model. This issue should be studied to ensure that options provided by the proposed entity have funding sources in place and are affordable to students.

Timing

SB 1000 prescribes definitive timetables for various tasks associated with the establishment of the proposed community college. While the department appreciates the need to move forward in an expeditious manner, it also urges caution in being too prescriptive. Given the magnitude of what is being contemplated, the department believes that it is more important to have a thoughtful rather than speedy process to plan and identify appropriate leadership.

Evaluation

As with any pilot program, it is important to understand how the program will be evaluated. While Section 1915-G of the legislation begins to address the need for data and information to assess the effectiveness of the proposed entity, the department notes that some of the elements of the reporting requirements listed may be difficult to collect. This should be an area of further discussion.

Dissolution

Section 1910-G of the legislation provides authority, if necessary, for the Secretary of Education to dissolve the regional community college pilot. Under this provision, the Commonwealth would assume all assets and liabilities should dissolution occur. This is a risk to the Commonwealth that reinforces the importance of making sure a strong funding structure and academic plans are in place before a school is officially piloted.

I hope the aforementioned recommendations are helpful to the committee and the sponsor of this legislation. Again, I would like to thank Senator Scarnati for his leadership on this issue. His passionate concern for the postsecondary education needs of his constituents and those in other rural communities in Pennsylvania should be commended, along with his desire to help create more programs directed toward career-ready jobs in Pennsylvania. This is an issue in which the department looks forward to working with him and this committee further. The department is optimistic that the concerns presented in this hearing today can help guide future discussions related to the goals of SB 1000.

Thank you and we look forward to answering your questions.