



Senate Education Committee

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BILL SUMMARY

Senate Bill 157, Printer's No. 144

Prime Sponsor: Fontana

Summary

The legislation creates a Task Force on Homeless Children's Education that is charged with examining the educational needs and status of homeless children in this Commonwealth in order to develop and recommend a Statewide proposal to provide a strong educational foundation for homeless children.

Issue

This issue has been a focus of the Homeless Children's Education Fund in Pittsburgh since its inception in 1999, although it has been an interest of the founder, Dr. Joseph Lagana, for over forty years. A 2001 federal law was enacted to provide stability and continuity in educating homeless children, whether their family's economic conditions force them to live with relatives, in different places every night, etc. It defines homeless children as "those who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence."

Last fall, PA's Education Law Center and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty filed a federal lawsuit against the Carlynton School District when it tried to remove four homeless children from its schools saying they didn't live in the district. A settlement reached in March ensures that homeless children in PA may attend school in any school district in which the family has a "substantial connection."

Analysis

SB 157 creates a task force comprised of 17 members: the Secretary of Education, who shall act as Chairperson; the Secretary of Public Welfare or designee; and the following members appointed by the Secretary of Education: five individuals from local agencies assisting homeless children and families representing the southwest, northwest, central, southeast and northeast areas of the state; four individuals from school districts -- one of which must be from a charter school -- representing urban, suburban and rural areas of the state; three individuals from intermediate units; and three individuals from social services organizations who have experience working with homeless children and education issues.

The legislation requires the task force to conduct a statewide survey of the landscape of the homeless child population on a statewide level, including gathering data on length of

homelessness, number of episodes of homelessness, highest educational level attained, living situation of homeless students, ages and grade levels of homeless students, school attendance rates and gaps in enrollment, average number of school changes, access to remedial services, access to after school programs, access to and use of Title I and all other funds to assist homeless students, drop-out rates of homeless children, standardized test scores, and causes and signs of homelessness. The survey also seeks to include the perspective of teachers, parents and others involved in providing services to homeless children, assess what is currently working to serve the population, parents' knowledge of the educational rights of their children, assessment of the relationship between homeless shelters and schools, benchmarks from other states on best practices and an assessment of methods used to identify and count the number of homeless children in the state.

The task force must file a report of its findings and recommendations within one year after its first meeting with the Governor, the President pro tempore and Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker and Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, and the chairman and minority chairman of the Education Committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives. State and local agencies that work with homeless children and to all Pennsylvania school districts are also to receive the report. Subsequent reports are to be made based on a schedule developed by the task force.

The task force is to meet quarterly and have their first meeting within 60 days of the effective date of the act. Members are not to be paid, but will be reimbursed for travel and reasonable expenses. The Department of Education is charged with providing staff and administrative support.

This legislation takes effect in 60 days.

History

Senator Fontana introduced this bill during the 2009-2010 legislative session as SB 1414, which received the unanimous support of the Senate Education Committee.