



Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials

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House Judiciary Committee
Public Hearing on House Bill 677, P.N. 750
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Remarks of Laura Cowburn, PRSBA
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Good afternoon. My name is Laura Cowburn and I am the Assistant to the Superintendent for Business Services of the Columbia Borough School District in Lancaster County. I am also the President-elect of the PA Association of School Business Officials (PASBO).

PASBO is a statewide professional association with more than 2,000 active members who are K-12 school employees below the rank of superintendent. Our members support classroom learning and student achievement by providing many services required in the day-to-day operations of schools including: finance, accounting, purchasing, facility management, transportation, technology, food service, human resources and communication.

On behalf of PASBO, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you concerning House Bill 677. PASBO supports allowing the publication of legal notices in community papers of mass dissemination in lieu of newspapers of general circulation. This legislation would be one step towards the recognition that the print media's role in mass communications has been minimized with the growth of electronic communication and specifically the Internet. The diminished readership and the consolidation of many daily newspapers have made other alternatives such as community newspapers a viable advertising medium for governmental entities. My school district, a small urbanized district at the eastern Lancaster County border with York County, uses a community shopper The Merchandiser as an advertising option. We believe it is just as effective and reduces our mandated advertising costs.

Many sections of the Public School Code require public advertisements under the theory that it provides a universal notification to the public. As one example, Section 807.1(a) requires that all contracts for furniture, equipment, textbook, school supply, and appliance contracts valued at \$10,000 or more be advertised in two newspapers of general circulation once a week for three weeks.

We also have to advertise our school board meeting schedule and special meetings as well. Recently I had to advertise our bond refinancing. We provided notice that we were reducing our debt service costs. I am not sure why we had to incur more costs to tell a few readers of the legal ads that we were saving taxpayer monies for our residents.

Newspaper advertising, as required under section 807.1(a), and other School Code provisions, is ineffective since a prospective bidder may not read the paper on the day in which the legal notice is posted. For example, Columbia Borough School District will soon go to bid for asbestos abatement in minor outside areas of the high school. It intends to advertise in the newspaper on May 15, May 20 and May 26. If a bidder does not read the paper(s) on those particular days, he or she will be unaware of the bid opportunity. Furthermore there are more accessible and less expensive methods to alert interested parties to the opportunity to bid. We have received bids for our high school yearbook pictures. One bidder's home office is from out of state. That bidder found our specifications through the Internet, not from our local newspaper.

Newspaper advertising rates are costly. To seek relief from these increasing costs, recently the Upper Moreland Township School District sought a Pennsylvania Department of Education mandate waiver allowing the district to advertise for furniture, equipment, textbook, school supply, and appliance contracts valued at \$10,000 or more on the district's official Internet website or in a "community newspaper of mass dissemination." The waiver allows the district to avoid the requirement in School Code Section 807.1(a) for advertising in a newspaper of general circulation.

In granting the waiver, the Department emphasized the District's annual advertising savings (estimated by the District to be \$13,000 to \$20,000) "will indirectly benefit all of the District's programs thus allowing the District to operate in a more effective, efficient or economical manner." Any savings realized can be redirected to benefit a District's instructional program.

While proposed House Bill 677 would amend the law to allow all school Districts to advertise contracts in community papers of mass dissemination, until the legislation is passed a school district wishing to obtain a Section 807 waiver will have to file its own application with the Department of Education.

PASBO would be pleased if House Bill 677 became law so other districts could benefit from the relief without seeking a mandate waiver. Moreover, PASBO would urge an amendment to House Bill 677 to allow the publication of legal notices on school districts' Internet websites, which the mandate waiver to which I referred allows. In addition to school districts realizing savings through such an option, electronic publication would recognize the benefits of current technology as well as provide convenient and immediate access to notices.

There are other more effective ways of advertising. My district learns of potential bidders by school-to-school contact and/or word of mouth, and utilizes direct mailing to notify existing vendors and potential vendors from the nearby area of bid opportunities. These options produce

interested bidders and get a school district as much result or an equivalent result than advertising in a newspaper.

Advertising bid opportunities on the Internet would be equally effective. Currently, in regards to obtaining applicants for open instructional positions, Columbia Borough School District uses several sources, including PA-Educator.net, a special education speech site for speech therapy positions, the local radio, professional associations like PASBO and the PA School Boards Association and the Commonwealth's PaCareerlink.com for non-instructional jobs. An equivalent number of applicants respond through these advertisements, not the local newspaper or merchandiser. I believe the use of the Internet would be equally successful to garner interested bidders, particularly if there was a central state depository. The Commonwealth could use the state's eMarketplace through the Bureau of Procurement to enable school districts to post solicitations and potential contract opportunities.

Meanwhile, although newspaper advertising may be less than effective in most regards, we are required to continue to advertise in this manner, costing taxpayers thousands of dollars. In some cases, a newspaper advertisement may only identify one bidder. If there was one place to go to view bids, there would certainly be more competition. The more competition the better results for school district and their taxpayers.

In summary, newspaper advertising offers no guaranteed results, yet school districts are required to advertise in them. We realize this may not result in sufficient bids so we choose to do more. This mandate is rooted in the past and fails to adapt to a very changed world that the Internet has created. Please provide school districts with relief from the continued escalating costs of newspaper advertisement and amend House Bill 677 to also allow for advertising legal notices on the Internet.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss PASBO's support of House Bill 677. I am happy to respond to any questions.

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