Vol. XIV, No.6 May 6, 1983

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National School Report

HARRISBURG, April 11 — The president of Pennsylvania's professional teachers union today said a national study calling for higher standards of education "strongly supports our efforts to strengthen the public schools of Pennsylvania."

The statement came from Jacque D. Angle, president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), following publication of a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

"From what we can see in our preliminary briefing on the Commission's report, there is a national call for immediate strengthening of our education system — both in Pennsylvania and nationwide — to keep pace with the needs of our changing economy," Angle said.

"This is precisely what our 130,000 members have been saying, and it is precisely what PSEA has been working for in its fight against the watering down of standards in the proposed curriculum revisions for Pennsylvania under the so-called Chapter 5 of state school regulations.

"As a matter of fact, it is teachers more than any other single group in the nation who have been fighting for increased requirements, standards, and course offerings in our schools.

"And it is, at the very least, extremely comforting to know that a highly respected study panel such as the National Commission on Excellence in Education has vindicated our position."

Angle said Pennsylvanians stand almost alone in the nation in having to fight against reduced standards of education.

"As we have known — and as the study report bears out — most states are moving to increase their standards.

"Pennsylvania is one of the few states moving to water down those standards in the name of economy.

"Fortunately, we are winning our fight here, and the Commission's report gives us just that much more ammunition."

Angle said that major findings of the Commission's report support PSEA's efforts on behalf of improved public education. Those findings include:

— lack of tough academic standards
— unchallenging textbooks
— deficiencies in teacher preparation
— crisis in math and science education
— problems posed by new computer technology
— inadequate foreign language programs
— failure to attract qualified teacher candidates
— not enough emphasis on reading and writing skills and the principles of government in a democracy.

"Maybe now that the national experts have spoken, our own state officials will hear the same message we have been sending for the past several years," Angle said.

"Certainly, we have been fighting for improved math and science, reading and writing, foreign languages, computer literacy, and social studies requirements — just to name a few.

"We have been attempting to gain a voice in improving the equality of textbooks for Pennsylvania children.

"A large share of our resources has been devoted to mapping plans for the improvement of teacher preparation.

"And certainly our major priority has been raising salaries of teachers to the point that promising young people will choose the field of education over business, engineering, or other professions."

Angle noted that while the so-called "President's Commission" calls for strengthened educational standards, the Reagan Administration has been cutting federal funds to public schools.

"And, of course, our own state is now paying 82 cents on the dollar of its legally required share of basic instruction costs in Pennsylvania.

"Unless there is a dramatic turnaround in the financial commitment which our public officials are ready to make on behalf of education, all the 'pro-education' reports in the world, no matter how sophisticated, will be little more than eyewash."

U.C. Fund

HARRISBURG (April 18) — Gov. Dick Thornburgh today proposed a comprehensive plan to restore solvency to Pennsylvania's debt-ridden Unemployment Compensation (UC) Trust Fund by 1986.

"A solvent UC Trust Fund is critical to our continuing efforts to improve Pennsylvania's business climate," said Thornburgh, "and a strong business climate is crucial to our hopes of preserving and creating jobs for our working men and women."

The governor noted that the UC fund had been allowed to deteriorate from a substantial surplus to a substantial deficit during the 1970s. He said that reforms adopted in 1980 slowed the growth of that debt, but were not sufficient to overcome the effects of worsening national recession that brought high unemployment to Pennsylvania and many other states.

Pennsylvania currently owes $2.7 billion to the federal government, and if corrective action is not taken, the debt will increase to over $5 billion by 1986. The Trust Fund currently is paying out $2 in benefits for every $1 it receives in employer taxes.

The major objectives of the governor's proposal are to:

* Achieve trust fund solvency in 1986.

* Pay off all UC debt and interest by 1992.

* Establish a self-sustaining UC Trust Fund which can automatically adapt to changing economic conditions.

These objectives would be achieved by fundamental changes in the tax structure to more equitably assess employers based on their actual use of the Fund, and by tightening eligibility requirements so that benefits protect those persons who have been genuinely attached to the workforce but who have become unemployed through no fault of their own.

The governor's proposal contains a "work sharing" provision under which employers and workers could agree on a system that would provide partial unemployment benefits and spread the available work to minimize the impact of layoffs caused by economic conditions.

The proposed tax and benefit changes would take effect next January. The Labor and Industry Department estimates that the changes would yield an additional $2.4 billion by the end of 1986, when the Trust Fund would become solvent. The plan also provides for repayment of all federal loans and interest by 1992.

"The proposal we are making today," the govenor said, "is a logical and necessary continuation of our successful effort earlier this year to obtain from the U.S. Congress relief from interest payments and escalating penalty taxes.

"Our solvency timetable will allow us to take advantage of the recent federal legislation permitting partial deferral of interest and slowing down the rate of increase in the penalty tax our employers must pay," he said.

"This proposal is the result of four months of extensive discussion with labor, business and government leaders," said Thornburgh. "Our timetable for reaching solvency is a reasonable one, and the tax-benefit burden will be shared fairly."

The governor said he asked for no changes in 1983 to avoid an abrupt cessation or adjustment of benefits and to give employers time to factor new UC taxes into their spending plans.

Secretary of Labor and Industry Barry H. Stern, whose department manages the UC Trust Fund, said the proposal not only will make the Fund solvent by 1986, but will lay the groundwork for a future of solvency.

"Past UC law changes have built imbalance and inequity into the system," said Stern. "This legislative package will correct these basic flaws and provide the foundation for a self-sustaining Trust Fund."

The proposed tax changes would:

* Replace the current employer tax system with the "reserve-ratio" system which is in use in 32 other states. This system assigns a tax rate based on the employer's lifetime experience with unemployment, rather than the three years now in use. Tax rates will vary between zero percent and 7.5 percent. The ratio which determines the tax rate is the one between the employer's individual tax account balance and the total taxable wages he pays out.

* Reduce from 1.9 percent to 1.5 percent the flat tax used to pay costs which cannot be assigned to an individual employer. A reduction in rate is possible because adoption of the reserve-ratio system will significantly shrink the volume of unassigned costs.

* Impose a flat tax of 1 percent on all employers to pay off interest on federal loans and all interest-bearing loans. Thereafter, the levy will convert to a "trigger tax" that will "trigger on" when the fund balance falls below $200 million and "trigger off" when the balance exceeds $400 million.

* Increase the taxable wage base from the federal minimum of $7,000 to $8,000 in 1984 and 1985 and to $8,400 in 1986. After that, it will be indexed at 40 percent of the average weekly statewide wage in the prior state fiscal year or at $8,400 whichever is greater. Seventeen states have a taxable wage base of over $7,000 and others are proposing increases above that level.

The principal benefit changes proposed would:

* Make weekly benefit rates a uniform 50 percent of the claimant's average weekly wage in the high earnings quarter. The current law aims at a 50 percent level, but the complicated benefit formula in use actually provides benefits at between 52 percent and 57 percent.

* Bring Pennsylvania into line with 45 other states by establishing a uniform duration of benefits at 26 weeks, but retaining the current requirement that a claimant must work at least 18 weeks to qualify. Currently, there is a variable duration of 26 to 30 weeks. This proposal would not affect federally-funded extended and supplemental UC benefits keyed to the unemployment rate.

* Increase overall qualifying wages to two times the high quarter wages, as opposed to the current level of approximately 1.6 times the high quarter.

* Establish a non-compensable waiting week before first payment of benefits. This change is required for compliance with federal law. This still will entitle claimants to 26 weeks of benefits, but they will be paid over 27 weeks. Thirty-two states now have non-compensable waiting weeks.

* Index the maximum weekly benefit at 60 percent of the average weekly statewide wage or the present maximum of $205, whichever is greater. The rate now is indexed at 66 and 2/3 percent of the average weekly wage.

* Index the minimum weekly benefit rate to 15 percent of the average weekly statewide wage. The maximum rate is currently indexed the same way.

* Reduce the weekly benefit amount only by the employer's share of pensions. It is now reduced by both employer's and employee's shares.

* Reduce benefits on a dollar-for-dollar basis for wages earned in excess of 20 percent of that benefit rate. Claimants currently can earn up to 40 percent of the benefit rate before reduction begins.

EDITORIAL

When an alumni unfortunately passed away recently, and it was reported that he had left Delco something in his will, we all waited in breathless anticipation to see what it would be. Would it be the much asked for new driveway? Would it be money to replace the stolen seals? Would it be new lounge furniture (Preferably something less dusty?) Would it be new topping for the tennis courts? Would it be (hope upon hope) new newspaper equ, ment? No the donation was for none of these. The donation was for (the envelope please) . . . A set of electric bells. (Yes he said bells.) Now I don't want to seem ungrateful, because I'm not. In fact I was pleased to learn that an alumni remembered us at all. And I realize that the bells cost quite a bit of money. What I don't understand is not for whom, but for why the bell tolls.

It is believed that the bells lend prestige and pride to our school. I disagree. They do help me know when my tennis classs is over, and they make great conversation pieces (everyone by now has heard some variation of the "Hunch Back of Penn State" story, you know the person who "Plugs" in the bells. Ah well technology touches even the classics.)

But I don't believe they give the campus more pride. I don't believe this because of my own feelings. I feel pride in this school not because we're number one in football, not because of the academic standards, and certainly not because of some electric gadget. I feel pride because of the people who make this campus up. Because of their ideas, goals and standards. Thats pride, real pride. The bells are nice and I thank our donor for them. But if your feel pride in our school feel it because of the humanity that makes it up and not four loud speakers on the roof.