

Public Education and the NC Legislature: What is on the Horizon?

With a politically divided government—a Republican majority in the NC legislature and a probable Democratic Governor, how can advocates for public education be effective? Newly reelected Representative Graig Meyer spoke to this question at a LWVODC forum on November 14, 2016.

Addressing an audience of about a hundred persons ranging in age from 8 weeks to 80 years, Meyer provided not only a detailing of recent and pending issues and legislative actions (see below) but as importantly provided a surprisingly optimistic perspective on opportunities that may exist in the current climate. He noted that times characterized by division and disruption, while disconcerting, may offer fertile ground for new and innovative ideas and proposals, i.e. , those that are not part of an entrenched political system may have a chance to emerge and garner bipartisan support. Advocacy groups must answer the essential questions: Where and how do we take stands? Where do we find common ground? Then through coordinating their efforts and numbers, they can strive to play a mediating role.

Throughout the forum, Representative Meyer stressed the importance of organization and persistence. He advised individuals and groups to partner and unite in solidarity around a message, request or action. By uniting around key principles and desired outcomes, activists and leaders can ultimately serve the general welfare of their neighbors and community - be it local, state, national or global. Key points also included:

- We need to listen and then act.
- Advocacy organizations can play a mediating role.
- We need to help hold people accountable.
- Educating legislators needs to be an ongoing process, not a one-time visit or message.
- We need to persist, not give up easily.

Being determined and persistent in contacting and visiting government officials and legislators is paramount and is why being organized and coordinated in our efforts matter. He also noted that numbers of volunteers provides leverage: large numbers of contacts, over time, send a powerful message. Preparation, data, specificity about goals and accountability measures, and personalization of message through narratives also matter.

Issues in Public Education

Meyer then spoke about issues in public education, both k-12 schools and higher education. He pointed out that issues that were argued in 2016 will continue to be debated in 2017. We also face new issues in 2017.

The continuing K-12 issues include:

- **Teacher pay and Principal pay**
He mentioned that, although NC ranks low in teacher pay, it is also important that legislators should address pay for principals, where NC ranks 50th in the nation.
- **Achievement School District**
A bill authorizing the creation of an Achievement School District (ASD) was passed in June

2016. This district would remove 5 of 50 low performing schools from oversight of their Local Education Agency (LEA) and put them under new management, a charter run district, under direction of an ASD Superintendent.

- **Charter school funding**
- **Voucher funding**
Significant increases in Voucher Funding are anticipated.

When encouraged to interact with each other around the topic, many audience members agreed that when talking about these issues, we also need a continuing commitment to school integration because over the last 20 years our schools have become increasingly re-segregated. Others noted that we must understand that trauma, including trauma related to low-income, chaotic lives, affect brains and negatively impacts children's ability to learn.

Additional K-12 issues that we face in 2017 include:

- **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** (the successor to No Child Left Behind) This year the state government will grapple with interpretation and implementation of the federal ESSA. This act requires that additional factors be added to our current school accountability and reporting systems.
- **Superintendent of Public Instruction** There will be a transition to new leadership at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) as Mark Johnson was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction succeeding June Atkinson who served three terms in that office.
- **Low Performing Schools** North Carolina assigns A-F performance grades for public schools. Schools rated D and F are considered low performing. This rating system is controversial.

Meyer offered an example of an initiative that could come under the heading of do good and do well: he suggested a shift to an 11 month teacher contract in order to allow for more instructional time, more professional learning, and curriculum development time. Although not a "raise" per se, this would by virtue of extending work weeks increase the annual salary for educators who continue, despite some relief, to be underpaid compared to the vast majority of teachers in other states. Although mentioned in the context of actions that would address those situations where student and school performance is continually low, this measure would be one that would benefit students across districts.

Issues in higher education

It is uncertain how these will play out because of the recent hiring of the new UNC system president Margaret Spellings as well as potential federal changes in accountability measures for higher education.

Concerns raised by the audience

At the invitation of Representative Meyer, the session was interactive and many of the audience comments and questions centered on the question of how to engage government and civic leaders in conversation and how to exert influence with respect to policy and practice.

Other issues brought up by the audience that ultimately impact the quality and effectiveness of education directly or through the process of assigning resources included:

- The impact of stress and trauma on learning (student and adult) and the importance of creating communities of caring within schools. (Rep Meyer referred to the recent NC Public Schools Forum Study Group Report for additional information on the impact of trauma and how schools are incorporating effective frameworks to address student needs.)
- Gerrymandering and its impact on the legislature and the courts. Meyer noted that non-partisan, re-districting gives everyone a voice.
- Divisiveness and fear that pits communities against each other; the lack of realization that the breakdown of the economic ladder affects both rural communities and urban communities. However, within this shared experience is power, if communities are able to unite rather than compete.

Ruth Ann Groh, Niki Jordan, Mary Kolek and Vicki Boyer contributed to this report.