



University of Pittsburgh

THE FORUM

The Tri-State Area School Study Council Newsletter

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Welcome
- 2 Recent Event Recaps
- 3 Women's Law Project
- 4-5 In Brief: School Law Update (prepared by Weiss Burkardt Kramer, LLC)
- 6 Green Building Alliance
- 6 Event Photos
- 7 Save the Dates

TRI-STATE AREA SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL

Seeking ways to increase organizational capacity in schools through problem solving, technical service, and staff development so all students will be better prepared to make contributions to both our democratic society and the world community

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Spring Banquet and Workshops

76th Annual School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet

The Tri-State Area School Study Council's School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet serves as an annual platform for acknowledging outstanding achievements in education through the presentation of both the Distinguished Educator Award and the D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award. Furthermore, the banquet provides an exceptional networking venue for district administrators and Board members.

The 2025 banquet convened on March 20th at the University Club. Further details regarding the banquet and this year's esteemed award recipients—Distinguished Educator Dr. Donald Martin, Executive Director of Intermediate Unit 1, and the Distinguished School Boards of Brentwood Borough and the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children—are available on page 2.

Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership

The annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership facilitates discussions on pathways to career advancement and endeavors to empower and inspire women aspiring to effect positive transformations within their professional and personal spheres. It is named in memory of Dr. Jean Winsand, who was an associate professor in both the Departments of Instruction and Learning and Administrative and Policy Studies in The University of Pittsburgh's School of Education.

The 2025 workshop, centered on the theme "Leading in Turbulent Times," took place on April 11th at the University Club. Each year, the Dr. Jean E. Winsand Distinguished Woman in Education Award is conferred upon a woman in education whose accomplishments are acknowledged as exemplary. The recipient of the 2025 award was Dr. Shannon Wagner, Superintendent of the Burrell School District. Concurrently, the Dr. Jean E. Winsand Emerging Woman in Education Award acknowledges a woman who has demonstrated significant impact and effected positive change through her leadership activities and initiatives at an early stage in her career. Dr. Marie Palano, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Assessment, Grades K-12, Seneca Valley School District, was the distinguished recipient of this year's award. *Read more on page 2.*

Law Symposium Registration

2025 Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop

Wednesday, June 18, 2025 | Regional Learning Alliance & Zoom

[Registration and details can be found here](#)

Thank you to the law firms who contribute to *The Forum* newsletter each issue:

- **Andrews & Price**, *Special Education Alert*
- **Tucker Arensberg Attorneys**, *Education Law Report*
- **Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC**, *In Brief: School Law Update* (Located on pages 4-5 of *The Forum*)

76th Annual School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet: In Review

The 76th Annual Distinguished School Board and Educator Banquet proved to be a memorable occasion, dedicated to honoring individuals who have made substantial contributions to education within their respective communities. The evening commenced with an incredible musical performance by the highly accomplished West Jefferson Hills School District Choir, under the direction of Mrs. Julia Lucci, which set a wonderful tone for the evening.

Following addresses by Dr. Michael Loughead, President of Tri-State, and Dr. Bart Rocco, Director of Tri-State, dinner was served, leading to the principal segment of the evening: the presentation of awards.



Dr. Rocco presents Dr. Martin with the Distinguished Educator Award

Recognition was first accorded to the **Brentwood Borough School Board**, lauded for its dedication to transparent governance and student-centered decision-making processes. Subsequently, the **Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children Board of Trustees** received accolades for their visionary leadership in the advancement of educational opportunities for students with visual impairments and disabilities. Both distinguished boards were recipients of the prestigious D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award, underscoring their commitment to collaboration, innovation, and the implementation of student-focused policies.

Concluding the awards segment, **Dr. Donald Martin**, Executive Director of Intermediate Unit 1, was presented with the Distinguished Educator Award. This accolade recognizes exceptional leadership demonstrated by individuals who have exhibited a profound commitment to the mission of the Tri-State Area School Study Council. Dr. Martin was selected in recognition of his visionary leadership, his dedication to education extending beyond conventional classroom settings, and his significant contributions to fostering innovation and enhancing learning opportunities throughout the region.

The event was attended by a notable assembly of educators, administrators, and professionals. Tri-State looks forward to hosting this distinguished gathering again in 2026!

22nd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership: In Review

The 22nd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership provided a significant day of professional development, focusing on the 2025 theme, "**Leading in Turbulent Times.**" The workshop began with an incredible keynote address delivered by Ms. Christina Cassotis, Chief Executive Officer of the Allegheny County Airport Authority, whose presentation was titled "**Leading Through Change with a Legacy First Mindset.**"



Christina Cassotis delivers the keynote address

After the keynote, participants partook in a comprehensive series of informative presentations, which included "**Ready. Fire. Aim: 40 Minutes to Prepare Yourself to Lead Safe and Secure Climates and Cultures**" presented by Dr. Melissa Nelson, "**Human Trafficking, Sextortion, and Grooming: How to Recognize, Stop, and Prevent**" presented by The Asservo Project, and "**Who's on First?**" a timely review of recent federal executive orders and their impact on education law, presented by Rebecca Heaton Hall & Jocelyn P. Kramer of Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC.

A noteworthy component of the workshop was the **Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children Student Market**. Tri-State extends its gratitude to these incredible students for showcasing their talents again this year!



Items for sale at the WPSBC Student Market

Following the luncheon, the 2025 philanthropic donation recipient, **The East End Cooperative Ministry (EECM)**, an organization undertaking significant work within the community, was formally recognized. The proceedings culminated with the presentation of two annual awards. The 2025 **Jean E. Winsand Distinguished Woman in Education Award** was conferred upon **Dr. Shannon Wagner**, Superintendent of the Burrell School District. The **Jean E. Winsand Emerging Woman in Education Award** was conferred upon **Dr. Marie Palano**, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Assessment, Grades K-12, Seneca Valley School District. Tri-State extends its sincere congratulations to these two deserving leaders!

Tri-State would like to thank its planning committee for their work in making this event possible. Tri-State also extends its appreciation to PASA and Classrooms without Borders for offering their resources to attendees. Tri-State eagerly anticipates welcoming attendees again in 2026!

Women's Law Project

Title IX and Pennsylvania Law Continue to Protect Pennsylvania Students from Sex Discrimination

Author: Mira Lerner, Legal Fellow

For nearly five decades, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has investigated complaints of discrimination in schools and enforced federal civil rights laws protecting students from discrimination based on race, gender, national origin, and disability. At the start of the Trump administration, complaints related to disability discrimination made up nearly half of the 12,000 active cases, reflecting a steady rise in concerns about whether students with disabilities can freely access the public education to which they are entitled under the law.

OCR received a record number of complaints in 2024. In response, the Trump Administration effectively dismantled the federal government's ability to address complaints by laying off staff and shuttering more than half of the agency's regional offices—including Philadelphia. As a result, over 46 million students in 27 states, including Pennsylvania, have lost access to federal civil rights enforcement.

Meanwhile, allegations of discrimination persist in Pennsylvania schools. A 2020 Spotlight PA report found that students of color at Pennsylvania's public universities frequently encounter racial harassment, hostile classroom environments, and stereotyping. GLSEN's research shows that 55% of LGBTQ+ students in the state report discriminatory policies or practices—particularly transgender and nonbinary students. In late 2024, the School District of Philadelphia was investigated by OCR and entered into a resolution agreement after failing to address antisemitic harassment adequately.

Now, such resolutions have no oversight. The closure of OCR's Philadelphia office eliminated a critical accountability tool—making it easier for schools to neglect their obligations to ensure safe, inclusive learning environments.

Without federal enforcement, Pennsylvania students generally must rely on state laws. The Pennsylvania Human Relations Act prohibits discrimination in public K–12 schools based on race, color, sex, religion, ancestry, national origin, and disability. Regulations promulgated under the PHRA explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity in its definition of sex discrimination. The Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act prohibits discrimination in postsecondary institutions, including colleges, universities, and trade, technical, professional, and business schools.

The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, funded by the state Legislature, is tasked with enforcing state civil rights laws. The Commission is a valuable resource, but it is a challenge to keep up with demand and timely resolution is not guaranteed. Given the evisceration of federal oversight, the state Legislature should consider increasing funding and staff support for this important statewide agency.

Another way the state government can compensate for federal regression on civil rights is to authorize the Pennsylvania Department of Education to investigate discrimination or harassment complaints. Alternatively, the state could create a state-based office with the Pennsylvania Department of Education tasked with investigating allegations of discrimination. This would create a parallel structure to the role OCR previously played as the civil rights arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

Given the uncertainty of current enforcement mechanisms, alleged discrimination should be effectively addressed before it rises to the level of a state or federal agency. It is more important than ever for school administrators to inform students and their families of anti-discrimination rules and identify clear pathways for addressing possible violations. Students have the right to know how to contact their schools' Title IX coordinator and other methods for filing complaints internally so there is a chance of timely remedy before having to rely on state agencies that, without a strategic effort to build capacity, may become increasingly overburdened as the federal government continues to dismantle civil rights protections for students.



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Title VI: Certification and Litigation Updates

By: Lynne Sherry, Esq.
and Ira Weiss, Esq.



What is Title VI?

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. The implementing regulations for Title VI can be found in the Code of Federal Regulations, Volume 34, Part 100 and outline the types of discrimination prohibited under Title VI, including racial harassment, permitting a hostile environment, segregation, and differential treatment. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is tasked with enforcing Title VI.

Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College

In Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College (citation omitted), Students for Fair Admissions sued Harvard University claiming that its admission policies were discriminatory. The group argued that Harvard's use of race as a factor in admissions led to Asian American students being unfairly held to higher academic standards compared to applicants of other racial backgrounds. Harvard argued that race was just one factor considered in admission, with a goal to create a diverse student body. The United States Supreme Court held that Harvard's admission process violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, effectively ruling that race-conscious admissions policies are unconstitutional.

While diversity can still be considered as a compelling interest, race cannot be used as a factor in admissions and institutions must pursue race-neutral alternatives.

The "Dear Colleague" Letter and PDE's Response

On February 14, 2025, USDOE issued a "Dear Colleague" letter regarding Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in Light of Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and the subsequently issued a document addressing Frequently Asked Questions About Racial Preferences and Stereotypes Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. These publications, directed to all LEAs and Higher Education institutions, set forth the position of the USDOE that, based upon the Supreme Court decision in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College, the USDOE views any program conducted by a recipient of Federal Funding that uses race as a

continued on next page.

The United States Supreme Court and Schools: Cases on the Horizon

By: Nicole Williams, Esq.



The U.S. Supreme Court recently heard arguments in three cases likely to shape the future of public education. A decision on all three is expected in late June or early July.

- Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond – Oklahoma's charter school law requires charter schools to be non-religious "in their programs, admissions policies, and other operations." In 2023, the Oklahoma Charter School Board approved the application of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and the Diocese of Tulsa to establish a virtual Catholic charter school. The purpose of the school is explicitly religious and the contract between the Charter School Board and the school stated that the school is allowed to freely exercise its religious beliefs. The Oklahoma Supreme Court granted the request of the state's attorney general to invalidate the contract. The U.S. Supreme Court must decide whether a privately owned and operated charter school's educational decisions are considered state action simply because the school has a contract with the state to provide free education to students, and whether the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause prohibits, or the Establishment Clause requires, a state to exclude religious schools from its charter-school program.
 - A.J.T. v. Osseo Area Schools – the question before the Supreme Court in A.J.T. is whether the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) require children with disabilities to satisfy a "bad faith or gross misjudgment" standard when seeking relief for discrimination relating to their education. Here, parents of A.J.T., a student with severe epilepsy requested accommodations related to the length and time of her school day, which the school refused. A.J.T., through her parents, was successful in her claim for lack of FAPE under the IDEA; however, there was no finding that the "deliberate indifference", which would have resulted in an award of money damages. The court found that the actions of the school did not amount to the "bad faith"
- continued on next page.*

Court Cases, *continued*

• A.J.T. v. Osseo Area Schools *continued* - standard required to receive damages under the discrimination statutes. The Supreme Court must now determine what must be shown in order to reach a finding of deliberate indifference under the ADA and Section 504.

• Mahmoud v. Taylor - Parents of students from various religious backgrounds in the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland sued the school board, arguing that the denial of notice and opt-out options for LGBTQ-inclusive books in the district's ELA curriculum for pre-K through grade 5 violated their religious freedom and parental rights. The U.S. Supreme Court now must decide whether public schools burden parents' religious exercise when they compel elementary school children to participate in instruction on gender and sexuality against their parents' religious convictions and without notice or opportunity to opt out. **Stay tuned for the outcome of these significant cases.** ♦

Title VI, *continued*

a criterion for participation as suspect and violative of Title VI. This letter also established a "whistleblower" process. Following the issuance of these publications, on April 3, 2025, the USDOE directed State Education Agencies (SEAs) to certify that LEAs are in compliance with Title VI, and the responsibilities outlined in Students for Fair Admissions, via a Title VI Certification Letter. On April 9, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) sent a Letter to the USDOE reaffirming its commitment to compliance with federal civil rights laws and affirming that all Pennsylvania LEAs are in compliance with and will continue to comply with Title VI. PDE took the position that no further action was required on the part of individual LEAs.

Ongoing Litigation

There have been multiple lawsuits filed across the United States by various groups and institutions challenging the USDOE's position and interpretation of Title VI since the publication of the DCL and Certification requirement. It is a very fluid situation with cases being filed almost weekly and court opinions being issued at a similar pace. As of this writing, there are two decisions that are noteworthy. In AFT v. U.S. Department of Education, which was filed in Maryland Federal Court, the Court stayed the February 14 Dear Colleague Letter and strongly suggested the related certification requirement issued to LEAs and SEAs, which were due April 23, 2025, should be stayed as well. Of more significance is the case of NEA v. USDOE, et al., which was decided by a Federal Court in New Hampshire. That court enjoined the USDOE and Linda McMahon, the Secretary of Education, from enforcing or applying either the Dear Colleague Letter or the above noted FAQ. Both of these cases granted Preliminary Relief with full injunction hearings to follow. The continuing litigation dictates that this will be an evolving process. **Attorneys at WBK will provide relevant litigation updates as they become available and remain ready to consult with districts on an ongoing basis regarding Title VI compliance and related issues.** ♦

WBK Happenings

- Attorneys Jocelyn Kramer and Rebecca Heaton Hall recently presented at Tri-State's Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership on current issues impacting schools.
- Several WBK attorneys will be presenting at the 2025 Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium & Special Education Workshop being held on June 18, 2025, at Regional Learning Alliance. Attorneys Kramer and Annemarie Harr will be presenting "Times are Tough but So Are You: A review of litigation, executive orders, and more." Attorneys Hall and Megan Turnbull will review traditional and novel 1st Amendment issues in the public sector and provide the background to issue-spot tricky free speech scenarios and offer strategies to stay legally compliant in the workplace, the classroom and public meeting settings in a presentation titled "Sex, Censure and Cyber Crime: 1st Amendment 2025 Edition." "Classroom to Courtroom: Where Family Law Meets Education Law" will focus on the intersection of family and education law with a focus on special education and will be presented by Attorneys Lynne Sherry and Kelly Perkovich.
- Attorneys Kramer and Harr will be speaking at the PSBA School Solicitors Symposium being held on July 31, 2025, and August 1, 2025 at the Omni Bedford Springs Resort in Bedford, PA. Their presentation will take a closer look at the impact of the recent Executive Orders, proposed regulatory updates, and related enforcement actions on our schools.

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This issue of In Brief: School Law Update is meant to be informational and does not constitute legal advice. Should districts want legal advice on any matter, they should contact their legal counsel or request a legal opinion from Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC.

Green Building Alliance

Green Professional: Operations & Maintenance for Schools (GPRO for Schools)

Author: Karma Lisa Edwards

Since 2023, Green Building Alliance (GBA) has worked with 12 schools and school districts across Western Pennsylvania to train and equip facilities managers on strategies for saving energy, cutting utility costs, improving indoor air quality, green cleaning methods, and maintaining healthy schools. Led by GBA professional staff, the Green Professional: Operations & Maintenance for Schools (GPRO for Schools) training program is customized to address the needs, challenges, and goals of building operators and facilities staff in PreK-12 schools. The program covers green building operations basics and equips staff with language, strategies, and tools to ensure healthy and energy efficient learning environments. GPRO for Schools provides tangible strategies that can be used immediately, including cost analysis and future planning. Some schools send a cross-section of staff so that everyone can understand the value of sustainable building operations and speak the same language. School building teams can join a public class, or GBA can offer private training to your school. The course includes an exam and credential administered by Urban Green. To learn more, reach out to Karma Edwards at karmae@gba.org.



Recent Event Photos



From top left: Distinguished Educator Award Winners, the Brentwood Borough School Board, the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children Board of Trustees, the Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop planning committee with Christina Cassotis, attendees at the Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop

2025-2026 Save the Dates

Lead Like Lasso

Tuesday, August 12, 2025 | Avonworth High School

Step into a transformative experience with "Lead Like Lasso," a workshop inspired by the beloved TV show Ted Lasso and backed by cutting-edge neuroscience. This engaging professional development session will provide you with science-based insights and practical strategies to enhance your leadership skills, helping you motivate and empower your team with confidence.

NCAA Update

Wednesday, October 15, 2025 | Petersen Events Center

Every fall, Tri-State, in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh Athletics Department and with the support of the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League, co-hosts the NCAA Update. This workshop is an invaluable resource for athletic directors, coaches, guidance counselors, high school principals, and district-level administrators, offering the latest insights and developments in college athletics.

Empower Your Educational Community: Attract, Hire, Retain, and Reward the Best People

Wednesday, October 29, 2025 | Posvar Hall, University of Pittsburgh

School Board Leadership Collective

Tentative: Wednesday, March 4, 2026 | TBD

School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet

Thursday, March 19, 2026 | University Club

The annual Tri-State Area School Study Council School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet honors and recognizes outstanding school leaders from our region. The event features entertainment, dinner, and the awards presentation.

PASA/PSBA Workshop

Friday, March 20, 2026 | Zoom

The PASA/PSBA workshop is hosted annually in March. The directors of (or representatives from) both the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and Pennsylvania School Board Association present important information and address concerns of school leaders.

Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership

Friday, April 10, 2026 | University Club

Held annually, the Dr. Jean E. Winsand Institute for Women in School Leadership is a one-day leadership conference for women leaders in K-12 school districts and educational institutions.

Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop

Thursday, June 18, 2026 | TBD

The Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop is co-hosted by Tri-State and Pitt Law and addresses legal issues in school law and special education for Superintendents, Central Office Staff, Building Level Administrators, Board Members, Solicitors, School Attorneys, School Leaders, Special Education Teachers and LEAs, Business Managers, and Parent Advocates.

The Forum is a publication of the Tri-State Area School Study Council. Comments and suggestions for future topics are welcomed. Tri-State can be contacted at tristate@pitt.edu

*The information in **The Forum** is for the general knowledge of the reader.
For more specific information, rely on the advice of your solicitor.*