TRI-STATE AREA SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL
University of Pittsburgh

THE FORUM

The Tri-State Area School Study Council Newsletter

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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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A Message from Dr. Rocco

Dear Members of the Tri-State Area School Study Council,

Every ten years or so in Western Pennsylvania, we seem to experience a winter that disrupts the normal rhythm of daily life. Snow, ice, and uncertainty interrupt routines and test our patience. Yet we also know that spring always follows. In just a short time, warmer weather and sunshine will return, reminding us that seasons of challenge are temporary.

This school year has felt much the same. Beyond the usual demands of our work, many of us have been navigating the challenges of a turbulent national political climate. In times like these, I often reflect on how children interpret the actions of adults. As educators, we carry both the privilege and the responsibility of serving as advocates for children and their families. Our steady leadership, professionalism, and commitment to learning provide stability when the broader environment feels uncertain.

The strength of our Tri-State network lies in our ability to support one another no matter how difficult the "weather." This year, the Tri-State Area School Study Council has proudly partnered with the Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents to deliver programs designed to strengthen leadership across our region. Our offerings have focused on Principal Leadership; Hiring, Retaining, and Rewarding Excellent Employees; and the critical importance of Mentoring for new staff.

We are also pleased to have restarted the Western Pennsylvania Principals Academy, which provides Act 45 credit for practicing school administrators. In addition, our School Board Collective continues to offer meaningful support and collaboration for superintendents and board members as they navigate increasingly complex governance responsibilities.
This spring, we look forward to gathering with many of you at several important events:

- The Distinguished Educators Banquet and School Board Recognition Program on March 26
- The Jean Winsand Women's Leadership Conference on April 10
- The Sam Francis Special Education Law Conference on June 18

Opportunities to connect, reflect, and learn together are more important than ever. Professional networks provide not only practical strategies, but also reassurance that we are not facing challenges alone. We encourage you to participate in our upcoming programming and to continue engaging with your colleagues across the region.

As always, we welcome your input. Please share your ideas about the professional development topics and supports you would like Tri-State to provide in the future. Your voice helps shape our work, and together we can ensure that our programming remains responsive, relevant, and impactful.

Thank you for your continued dedication to the students and communities you serve. Even in turbulent times, your leadership makes a lasting difference.

With appreciation,

Bart Rocco, Ed.D.
Executive Director of the Tri-State Area School Study Council

Announcing the 2026 Tri-State Award Recipients

As we look ahead to the spring semester, the Tri-State Area School Study Council is proud to announce the 2026 award recipients for our two signature events. We invite you to join us in honoring these exceptional leaders and engage in meaningful professional learning.

77th Annual Distinguished Educator & School Board Banquet

Honoring leadership, governance, and commitment to public education.

March 26, 2026 | 5:30 PM – 9:30 PM | University Club | Click here to register

Distinguished Educator Award: Dr. Michael Loughead, *Superintendent, Hampton Township School District*
Dr. Loughead is honored for a career spanning over 40 years, defined by a "whole child" philosophy and a commitment to innovation. Under his guidance, Hampton Township has become a member of the League of Innovative Schools, modeling student-centered learning. He is also recognized for his community advocacy and contributions to professional research networks.

D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award: Northgate School District
The Northgate Board is recognized for its transformative governance using Human-Centered Design. By establishing clear "Norms & Values" to foster trust and open dialogue, the Board has successfully guided the district to become an AASA Lighthouse District. Their commitment to creating a supportive, high-functioning environment for all students sets them apart as an exemplary school board.

D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award: Butler Area School District he
The Butler Area School District Board of School Directors is recognized for its culture of trust, empowerment, and deep community alignment. Through their "Community Compact," they have created an initiative that deeply connects schools with civic organizations and employers for a "win-win" approach to student success. Their encouragement of innovation, coupled with their commitment to stability, sets them apart as an exemplary school board.

23rd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in Education

A day of leadership development, networking, and celebration for women in education.

April 10, 2026 | 7:30 AM – 2:00 PM | University Club |

Keynote: Dr. Joan Gabel, Chancellor, University of Pittsburgh

Distinguished Woman in Education: Dr. Jeannine French (Peters Township SD)
With a unique background in clinical psychology, Dr. French leads with resilience and compassion, prioritizing the well-being of the entire school community. She is honored for consistent focus on student-centered leadership, system improvement, and organizational excellence, complemented by her ability to navigate complex challenges.

Emerging Woman in Education: Dr. Melissa McCauley (West Jefferson Hills SD)
Dr. McCauley is recognized as a dynamic force for student empowerment. She founded the G.O.L.D. program, a district-wide initiative connecting young women with mentors. Her energetic leadership drives positive school culture, and she is celebrated for personalizing learning opportunities and uplifting those around her.

Green Building Alliance

Careers Conference for Youth and No-Cost Operations & Maintenance Training for School Facility Professionals

Author: Destiny Knetzer, Director of Education & Events

Friday, March 13, High School students are invited to a day of exploring building design industry trends, the role of sustainability and green building, as well as career pathways and the various career tracks in high-performance design, construction, operations, engineering, and more. Lunch will be provided, and reimbursement for student transportation is available.

Looking to improve the energy efficiency of your schools, lower your utility costs, and reduce illness and absenteeism caused by poor indoor air quality in your building and classroom spaces? Through a generous grant from The Grable Foundation, Green Building Alliance (GBA) continues to offer Green Building Professional (GPRO) Operations & Maintenance for Schools training at no cost. With a focus on preventative maintenance, GPRO for Schools is specially designed to equip PreK-12 facility and custodial teams with practical, actionable, and affordable strategies for reducing energy and water use, and improving IAQ. GBA provides personalized guidance on improving HVAC systems, ventilation and air filtration; cleaning products; chemical use; pest management; products and finishes; and more.

To learn more about these free programs, reach out to info@gba.org.

Green Building Alliance

Symposium on Challenges and Opportunities in Educating Multilingual Learners in Western Pennsylvania

The Tri-State Area School Study Council, in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh School of Education and the Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents, is pleased to support the **Symposium on Challenges and Opportunities in Educating Multilingual Learners in Western Pennsylvania**, taking place on **Thursday, March 5, 2026**, from **9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.** in the **Assembly Room of the William Pitt Union**.

This one-day symposium will convene **school administrators, superintendents, ESL/ESOL teachers, special education coordinators, student support staff, and community partners** to explore current challenges and promising practices related to multilingual learner programming. Designed to support both instructional and leadership perspectives, the event will feature a keynote address on multilingual learners in Western Pennsylvania and guest speakers **Dr. Michelle Regalla**, **Dr. Kristin Davin**, and **Mr. Bob Measel**, who will address instructional alignment, multilingualism, and state requirements for program design and evaluation.

A **networking lunch** and **facilitated afternoon roundtables** will encourage collaboration and shared learning. **Act 48 credits are available**, and the event is **Title III eligible**. **Registration is now open.**

Scan to register

WBK
Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC
Education & Municipal Law

In Brief: School Law Update

WBK IS 100% women-owned. Winter 2026

New Case Clarifies School District Transportation Obligation for Charter Students

By: Rebecca Hall, Esq.

On January 21, 2026, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court clarified the obligations of public schools to provide transportation services to charter school students. In Bell v. Wilkinsburg School District, a student's grandmother and charter school filed suit against the school district claiming that the school district's decision to discontinue providing school bus transportation for charter students and instead provide students with free bus passes violated the law.

Section 1726-A(a) of the Pennsylvania Public School Code states,

> Students who attend a charter school located in their district of residence, a regional charter school of which the school district is a part or a charter school located outside district boundaries at a distance not exceeding ten (10) miles by the nearest public highway shall be provided free transportation to the charter school.... Transportation is not required for elementary students, including kindergarten students, residing within one and one-half (1.5) miles or for secondary students within two (2) miles of the nearest public highway from the charter school...unless the road or traffic conditions are such that walking constitutes a hazard to the safety of students when so certified by the Department of Transportation, except that if the school district provides transportation to the public schools of the school district for elementary students, residing within one and one-half (1.5) miles or for secondary students residing within two (2) miles of the nearest public highway under nonhazardous conditions, transportation shall also be provided to charter schools under the same conditions.

Given the "under the same conditions" language, the charter school reasoned that charter students must be provided transportation identical to what was provided to district students. The school district argued that transportation provided to charter students must only be free, with no requirement that the mode of transportation be identical.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court found in favor of the school district.

It indicated that "had the General Assembly intended to require identical transportation between charter and public school students, it could have easily said so – and presumably would have done so in the first sentence, not the second, by simply inserting the word

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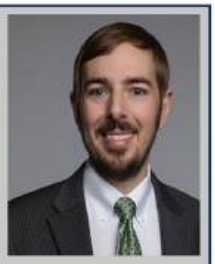
Multiple lawsuits seek to compel a County-wide tax reassessment in Allegheny County



By: Lee Dellecker, Esq.

Despite being the second largest county in terms of population size, Allegheny County continues to rely on an outdated 2012 base year property tax assessment system to finance local government. In recent years, Allegheny County's commercial tax base has been substantially eroded due to sophisticated commercial property owners taking advantage of a rapidly declining Common Level Ratio ("CLR"). Unfortunately, with Allegheny County's CLR declining to 50.14% for the 2026 tax year, this trend is likely to continue until the base year is updated and a mass reassessment is conducted and implemented by the County's assessment office.

Many taxing authorities have resorted to increasing their millage rates to offset the loss of their commercial bases, which in turn has effectively shifted tax liability away from commercial property owners over to residential property owners. While Allegheny County currently has no plans to voluntarily reform its tax assessment system, multiple lawsuits have been filed to compel a County-wide reassessment.

On April 8, 2024, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) was the first to act, initiating an action challenging Allegheny County's 2012 base year. That lawsuit is currently pending before Commonwealth Court, which must address the issue of whether a taxing authority has standing to unilaterally compel a mass reassessment, or whether such a lawsuit must be initiated by an aggrieved private citizen who owns taxable real estate within the county.

In the first half of 2025, additional lawsuits were filed by Flavia Laun and Leo Quigley, new homeowners who saw their property tax assessments increased due to school district-initiated assessment appeals. The Flavia Laun lawsuit is seeking an immediate County-wide reassessment and is currently awaiting a status conference before the Honorable Kenneth G. Valasek. There is strong possibility this lawsuit will receive an evidentiary hearing in 2026. The Leo Quigley lawsuit requests similar relief but is also asking that the Court require regularly scheduled County-wide reassessments moving forward. It is essentially seeking a long-term solution.

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Transportation for Charter Students, continued

"identical" between "free transportation." Therefore, while public schools must provide transportation services to charter school students, the school can determine the types of transportation that are appropriate and may select a lower cost method. It is not required to provide the same transportation services that are used for public school students.

We encourage you to reach out to your solicitor or the attorneys at Weiss Burkardt Kramer with any transportation questions. ♦

Act 47: New Mandates Regarding Cyber Charter School Enrollment and Attendance

By: Michelle Gannon, Esq.

On January 15, 2026, Act 47 of 2025 went into effect. As part of this legislation, substantial reforms were enacted relating to cyber charter schools. Primarily, students identified as "habitually truant" can no longer be accepted as students at a cyber charter school, absent judicial order permitting the student's enrollment in the same. School districts, when issuing notifications regarding truancy, are required to inform parents that habitual truancy may bar cyber charter transfers and include resources for remediation.

Parents of cyber charter school students will now be required to validate residency twice annually to both the cyber charter school and the local school district. PDE is working towards developing a form to enable parents to submit this information. These residency validations are due every March 1st and November 1st. By March 11th and November 11th, the local district is required to report residency disputes to both PDE and the cyber charter school to contest residency. The cyber charter school then has an additional ten (10) days to respond. If the cyber charter school agrees that the student is no longer a resident of the local district, the local district may cease paying tuition associated with that student. If the charter school disputes the local district's residency conclusion, those matters are to be submitted to PDE for an ultimate determination. Pursuant to the statute, tuition payments made by the local district are to continue until such time as the dispute is resolved.

Act 47 also requires charter, regional charter and cyber charter schools to establish attendance policies designed to accurately determine when a child who is enrolled has an excused or unexcused absence or is present for instruction. These policies may differ from the policy of the school district in which the child resides. In addition, cyber charter schools are now required to report unexcused absences and establish policies defining attendance for both synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

Should you have any questions regarding the implementation of Act 47 or school responsibilities, we encourage you to reach out to your solicitor or the attorneys at WBK. ♦

County-wide Tax Reassessment, continued

School districts should be cautioned that the replacement of the 2012 base year system is not imminent. Even if one of these lawsuits results in a favorable ruling in 2026, that ruling is still subject to appeal by Allegheny County. **Additionally, mass reassessments are expensive and time-consuming initiatives that can take multiple years to complete. With that in mind, taxing authorities should operate under the assumption that there will not be a County-wide reassessment in Allegheny County until at least 2030. ♦**

WBK News

- Attorney Lynne Sherry has been named a non-equity partner at WBK effective January 1, 2026.
- Attorneys Ira Weiss and Annemarie Harr will be serving as adjunct professors at Point Park University School of Education, teaching a school law and ethics course to CTE teachers in the Spring 2026 semester.
- Attorneys Harr, Sherry, and Jocelyn Kramer presented at the 2026 ACAPA (Attendance/Child Accounting Professional Association) held on February 9-10, 2026, in Hershey, PA. Attorneys Harr and Kramer spoke on the topics of Gender Identity in Schools - Navigating Legal Responsibilities and Social Media in Education - Legal Risks and Responsibilities, while Attorney Sherry presented on Attendance, Truancy and Residency: What Every School Needs to Know.
- On March 7, 2026, Attorney Weiss will be speaking to the University of Pittsburgh School of Education doctoral class on the topic of Competent Management of Financial Resources.
- On March 25, 2026, Attorneys Harr and Elizabeth Sattler will be presenting at the PASBO Annual Conference on the topic of FMLA and Return to Work.
- Attorney Megan Turnbull will be speaking on the topic of Blight as part of a PBI panel presentation being held on May 14, 2026, via webcast.

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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.

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Western Pennsylvania Writing Project (WPWP)

Western Pennsylvania
WRITING PROJECT

Young Writers Institute

The Western Pennsylvania Writing Project's Young Writers Institute invites **rising 5th-11th grade students** to explore writing in an engaging and exciting environment.

The Institute will help young writers develop their skills through a broad range of learning experiences led by certified classroom teachers, esteemed writers, and advanced writing students from regional colleges and universities. Click on the Themes dropdown on the YWI page to learn more about our grade level themes.

- **Dates:** Weekdays, June 22 – June 30, with an evening showcase on July 1, 2026
- **Location:** University of Pittsburgh in Posvar Hall, with possible outings throughout the Oakland neighborhood
- **Cost:** $400 per child, with discounts for multiple registrations as well as a sliding scale for need-based support
- **Discounts:** Sibling discounts and need-based discounts are available at checkout!

Registration is rolling. YWI will accept a total of 75 registrants. Please share this opportunity with teachers, parents, and students. Visit the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project website for more information, FAQ, and registration. Please email wpwp@pitt.edu with any questions.

Summer Institute

We are thrilled to share an exciting opportunity for educators this summer: the 2026 WPWP Summer Institute, hosted by the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project at the University of Pittsburgh.
This restorative and explorative four-week seminar (July 7–30) is designed for early childhood, K–12 and post-secondary teachers, instructional leaders, and community educators who want dedicated time to:

- Grow as writers and thinkers
- Deepen instructional practice and writing culture
- Explore innovative strategies for literacy, equity, access, and social justice
- Connect with a supportive network of educators and WPWP Fellows

Participants will engage in writing, shared demonstrations of practice, meaningful readings, and collaborative inquiry that is grounded in research and classroom experience. Educators can earn ACT 48 credits, optional graduate credits (free of charge!), and become ongoing members of a powerful professional learning community.

Learn more and share this with your team: https://www.wpwp.pitt.edu/offerings/educators

We'd be delighted to discuss how this experience can support your school or district goals. Please feel free to reach out to wpwp@pitt.edu with any questions!

2025–2026 Tri-State Executive Committee

Tri-State Area School Study Council

Tri-State is governed by an Executive Committee of regional superintendents, intermediate unit executive directors, and career and technical center directors.

Below is the 2025-2026 Executive Committee membership

Director
Bart Rocco, *University of Pittsburgh*

Officers
Joseph Guarino, President, *New Brighton Area School District*

Executive Committee
Darby Copeland, *Parkway West CTC*
Matthew Curci, *ARIN IU 28*
Timothy Gabauer, *Mount Pleasant Area School District*
David Lehman, *Forest Hills School District*
Janell Logue Belden, *Deer Lakes School District*
Michael Loughead, *Hampton Area School District*
Michael Lucas, *Trinity Area School District*
Donald Martin, *Intermediate Unit 1*
Scott Martin, *Bentworth School District*
Michelle Miller, *South Fayette Township School District*
Donna Nugent, *Big Beaver Falls Area School District*
Gennaro Piraino, *Franklin Regional School District*
Janet Sardon, *West Jefferson Hills School District*
Robert Scherrer, *Allegheny Intermediate Unit*
Tracy Vitale, *Seneca Valley School District*
Brian White, *Butler Area School District*

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.*