



University of Pittsburgh

THE FORUM

The Tri-State Area School Study Council Newsletter

Volume 31, Issue 3

Spring 2026

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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

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

5151 POSVAR HALL
230 S BOUQUET ST
PITTSBURGH, PA 15260

TRISTATE@PITT.EDU

Recognizing Excellence in Education

77th Annual School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet The Tri-State Area School Study Council's annual banquet acknowledges outstanding achievements in education through the presentation of the Distinguished Educator and D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Awards. The 2026 event convened on Thursday, March 26th at the University Club. See page 2 for full details regarding the banquet and this year's esteemed award recipients: Distinguished Educator Dr. Michael Loughead, and the Distinguished School Boards of the Butler Area School District and the Northgate School District.

23rd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership Named in memory of associate professor Dr. Jean E. Winsand, this annual workshop facilitates discussions on career advancement to empower and inspire women in educational leadership. Centered on the theme "The Architecture of Leadership," the 2026 workshop took place on Friday, April 10th at the University Club. This year, the Distinguished Woman in Education Award was conferred upon Dr. Jeannine French (Peters Township School District), and the Emerging Woman in Education Award was presented to Dr. Melissa McCauley (West Jefferson Hills School District). *Read more on page 2.*

Law Symposium Registration

2026 Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop

Thursday, June 18, 2026 | Regional Learning Alliance & Zoom

Held annually, 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.

[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*)

77th Annual School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet: In Review

On Thursday, March 26, 2026, the 77th Annual Distinguished School Board and Educator Banquet brought educators and leaders together at the University Club to celebrate collective excellence across our region.

The evening commenced with an incredible performance by the Butler Area School District Rock Orchestra, directed by Mrs. Katherine Vercek-Black. Following welcoming remarks and a message from University leadership, including Dr. Bart Rocco, Dr. Joseph Guarino, and Dr. Gary Gabel, Dr. Michelle Miller provided the blessing before transitioning to the awards presentation.

D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award This year, the D. Richard Wynn Distinguished School Board Award was proudly presented to the Board of School Directors from both the Butler Area School District and the Northgate School District. Both distinguished boards were selected for their collaborative governance and long-term commitment to improving educational outcomes and implementing student-focused policies in their communities.

Distinguished Educator Award Concluding the evening's recognitions, Dr. Michael Loughead, Superintendent of the Hampton Township School District, was honored with the 2026 Distinguished Educator Award. Dr. Loughead was selected in recognition of his exceptional vision, enduring dedication to cultivating positive learning environments, and his career-long impact on students and staff throughout the region.

Tri-State congratulates this year's outstanding awardees and extends sincere gratitude to everyone who attended and helped make the 2026 banquet a resounding success!

23rd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership: In Review

The 23rd Annual Dr. Jean E. Winsand Workshop for Women in School Leadership convened on Friday, April 10, 2026, at the University Club. Embracing the theme "The Architecture of Leadership," the day began with an amazing and empowering keynote address by Joan Gabel, Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh.

Following the keynote, participants engaged in dynamic breakout sessions offering practical leadership strategies. Presentations included "Find a Mentor, Be a Mentor" with Dr. Janet Sardon and Dr. Mary Catherine Reljac, "Shatterproof Leadership" led by Dr. Beth Hutson, and "Drop the Guilt. Keep the Power" presented by Dr. Cassandra Doggrell and Dr. Marie Palano.

The event also highlighted powerful community and artistic initiatives. Attendees experienced "Colorism: Looking Outside the Brown Paper Bag," a thought-provoking mixed-media exhibition by artist and educator Dr. Ashley A. Jones exploring the history and impact of colorism among Black women. Additionally, the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children's (WPSBC) Pop-Up Student Market returned to showcase the impressive talents of student entrepreneurs. In a tremendous show of support for our 2026 philanthropic beneficiary, attendees donated 120 pounds of goods to the Pitt Pantry to support students facing food insecurity.

The workshop culminated in the celebration of two exceptional leaders. The Jean E. Winsand Distinguished Woman in Education Award was conferred upon **Dr. Jeannine French**, Superintendent of the Peters Township School District, for her lifelong impact and exemplary service. The Jean E. Winsand Emerging Woman in Education Award recognized **Dr. Melissa McCauley**, Associate Principal at the West Jefferson Hills School District, honoring the significant difference she is making early in her leadership journey.

Tri-State extends its sincere gratitude to the planning committee, the Winsand family, and all presenters and attendees for another unforgettable workshop!

Green Building Alliance

Education & Training Opportunities with Green Building Alliance

Author: Destiny Knetzer, Director of Education & Events

For Classrooms Inspire your students with a Green Building Alliance (GBA) classroom experience! Through hands-on activities and interactive discussions, students of any age explore how “green” or “smart” high-performance buildings are designed and constructed, gain insight into what sustainability and resilience mean in relation to how many different kinds of buildings – and whole communities – are planned, and discover career pathways in construction, design, and beyond. For High School Students, GBA also offers a "Getting Started with Green Building" session introducing the fundamentals of green building, industry evolutions influencing the workforce, and arising opportunities.

For Facilities 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) is offering Operations & Maintenance for Schools training at no cost. With a focus on preventative maintenance, this training 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 programs that GBA offers, please reach out to info@gba.org.



Photos from the Spring



From top left: Chancellor Joan Gabel, Dr. Ashley A. Jones, Dr. Rocco with 26 Winsand Award winners, former Winsand Distinguished Woman Award Winners, former Distinguished Educator award winners, the Butler Area School District Rock Orchestra, the Butler Area School Board, Dr. Michael Loughead receiving his award, the Northgate School District Board.

Rain Tax or Stormwater Fee: The Pennsylvania Supreme Court Weighs in on Stormwater Fees



By: Megan M. Turnbull, Esq.

Since 1978, our Commonwealth has required counties to adopt and implement stormwater management plans. Over time, the related compliance requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (“DEP”) have evolved and intensified. Although seemingly benign, excessive stormwater has the power to erode landscapes, pollute waterways, threaten drinking water sources and overload sanitary sewage treatment facilities. Aging and undersized infrastructure compounds these challenges. As with other unfunded mandates, compliance costs flow “downstream” to municipalities and then taxpayers and ratepayers in the form of taxes and fees.

From the inception of stormwater fees, tax-exempt entities have borne a significant financial burden with facilities that often include large parking lots, sizable roofs and other impervious surfaces. One such public entity, West Chester University, refused to pay a municipal stormwater fee at its inception in 2017, taking the position that the fee was a tax. The dispute made its way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. On April 30, 2026, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court affirmed a 2023 decision from the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania holding that the Borough of West Chester’s “stormwater charge” is a tax, not a fee for service.

The purpose of the Borough’s “stream protection fee” was to fund construction, operation, and maintenance of its municipal stormwater system (its MS4 system), as required under federal and state environmental regulations. Like many similarly situated fees, the fee was assessed against developed properties based on impervious surface area (roofs, pavement, etc.).

West Chester University refused to pay approximately \$132,000 annually, arguing they are instrumentalities of the Commonwealth and therefore immune from local taxation. The Borough argued the charge was not a tax, but rather a user fee for services rendered, which would be enforceable as a tax-exempt entity.

The Court utilized a two-part test for distinguishing a fee from a tax: (1) Is the municipality acting in a public capacity or a quasi-private capacity; and (2) Is the charge tied to a specific individualized service? Under the first inquiry, the Court found the Borough was acting in its public/governmental capacity.

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Bill Directed at Student Cell Phone Access & Use in Schools Advances to Pennsylvania House of Representatives



By: Annemarie Harr Eagle, Esq.

As you may be aware, Pennsylvania lawmakers are advancing House Bill 1814 in order to restrict cell phone access and use in K-12 public schools across the Commonwealth. The proposed legislation would prohibit students from using or possessing a cell phone during the school day. In order to achieve this goal, students would be required to secure their phones to prevent access until the school day has concluded. Currently, the bill has passed the House Education Committee and is moving to the full House for consideration.

Should the Bill pass, it will not require implementation until the 2027-2028 school year. By the start of that school year, each school entity will be required to adopt a policy related to student possession and use of mobile devices during the school day and while on school property. The policy will be required to prohibit the use of mobile devices during the school day while on school property, establish the manner in which a student’s possession is to be restricted, and establish appropriate enforcement and oversight provisions to ensure compliance at each school building. Other requirements on school entities include providing a written notice to parents and guardians at least annually and upon enrollment (1) to allow the parents and guardians to sign up for emergency notifications, and (2) to provide the methods to contact their child during the school day. Should the bill take effect and the policies be developed, each school entity will be required to submit their policy to the Department of Education within five (5) business days after posting the policy.

Importantly, nothing in the proposed legislation would require a school entity to take possession of a student’s mobile device. However, should the school entity’s policy permit an employee of the school to take possession of the student’s mobile device, the school entity or employee shall not be liable for any damaged or lost devices so long as the school employee acted in good faith to secure the device in accordance with the school’s policy.

continued on next page.

Stormwater Fee, continued

The Court did not address part 2 of the test, because part 1 was dispositive. However, the opinion noted that the following were present in this case and are classic features of taxation rather than a service fee:

1. There was no voluntary contractual relationship between the Borough and university parties
2. The charge was mandatory
3. Payment was not in exchange for a negotiated service

The Court concluded that stormwater management performed by a municipality is a public governmental service, not a proprietary utility service. Therefore, charges funding it are taxes, and tax-immune Commonwealth entities do not have to pay them.

Many school districts have been charged by their local municipalities for stormwater services and may be entitled to recoup some or all of the fees paid. **Note that this case does not make refunds automatic. If your school district has been paying these types of charges, please contact our office to discuss applicability and strategies for recovery.** ♦

WBK News

- We are pleased to announce that Attorneys Ira Weiss and Megan Turnbull have been named 2026 Pennsylvania Super Lawyers.
- On May 2, 2026, Attorney Weiss addressed the topic of School Law for the Pennsylvania School Board Association's (PSBA) school board member training.
- Attorney Jocelyn Kramer co-presented a Continuing Judicial Education program on School and Municipal Law on May 21, 2026.
- Attorneys Annemarie Harr and Lynne Sherry will be presenting on CTC/Special Education Issues at the Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop being held on June 18, 2026, both virtually and in person at the Regional Learning Alliance in Cranberry Township, PA. Attorney Kramer will also be presenting at the Symposium on the topic of Speech, Conduct, and Consequences: The Legal Boundaries of School Employee Discipline. Attorney Turnbull will be leading the Ethics presentation.
- Attorneys Sherry and Kramer will also be speaking at PSBA's 2026 School Solicitors Symposium in State College, PA on July 16-17, 2026. Attorney Sherry's presentation is Emerging Trends in Special Education Law Across the Commonwealth while Attorney Kramer will be co-presenting a presentation titled: Going Viral at School: When Employee and Student Speech Crosses Constitutional Lines.
- Attorney Harr will be providing legal updates to PACTA (Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators) during their annual meeting on July 27 and 28, 2026.
- Attorney Megan Turnbull will be a member of a PBI panel: Fighting Blight: Tools for Reclaiming our Communities. The presentation, rescheduled from its original May 14, 2026 date, will be held via webcast on August 18, 2026. Attorney Turnbull is scheduled to cover the topics of Code Enforcement Practice and Procedure and Conservatorship, Land Banks, and Owner/Municipal Options.

Cell Phone Access in School Bill, continued

Finally, the proposed legislation creates numerous exceptions including for students who require a mobile device due to a medical condition documented by a medical provider or immediate family member of the student, who have an IEP or 504 Plan that requires the use of a mobile device as part of the accommodations or services provided to the student, who are English learners who use their device for translation services, or who have permission from a teacher to use the device for educational purposes when a school issued device is insufficient or unavailable; the principal agrees that the mobile device is necessary; and the approval is for a limited time. The policy may allow for additional exceptions to be authorized by a principal so long as the principal submits notification of the exception to the chief school administrator or designee and provides notice of the purpose of the exception, the timing of the exception, and a description of who the exception applies to. The exception may not last longer than a school day.

Should this bill become law, it is expected that schools will face a significant volume of requests for accommodations to allow for the use of cell phones during the school day. As always, a student's IEP or 504 Plan should not be modified absent the convening of a team meeting, and an accommodation should not be added unless there is data supporting the requested accommodations. **We encourage you to stay in contact with your solicitor for updates on this pending legislation.** ♦

Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC

437 Grant Street, Suite 918

Pittsburgh, PA 15219

www.wbklegal.com

Phone: (412) 391-9890 • Fax: (412) 391-9685

Ira Weiss	iweiss@wbklegal.com
Jocelyn Kramer	jkramer@wbklegal.com
Megan Turnbull	mturnbull@wbklegal.com
Annemarie Harr Eagle	aharr@wbklegal.com
Lynne Sherry	lsherry@wbklegal.com
Nicole Williams	nwilliams@wbklegal.com

Contact other WBK attorneys by visiting wbklegal.com

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.

Women's Law Project

The Necessity for Evidence-Based Sex Education in a Landscape of Disinformation

Authors: Tara Murtha and Sujaya Rajguru

Young people deserve access to evidence-based education and information about sexual and reproductive health. But in the current information landscape, young people are being met with disinformation and deprivation nearly everywhere they turn to seek trusted information: Viral TikTok videos spread misinformation about birth control while systemic bias built into social media and AI platforms suppresses accurate information. The anti-abortion “crisis pregnancy center” industry targets teens with digital disinformation campaigns while our federal government quietly deletes websites that once provided accurate information about sexual and reproductive health.

Young people can't even obtain this information in school, which is partly why they search online in the first place. Despite years of advocacy, the Pennsylvania Legislature has repeatedly failed to advance proposals to mandate evidence-based sex ed.

Experts describe this sexual and reproductive health (SRH) disinformation crisis as an “infodemic.” Paired with political efforts to restrict young people's access to reproductive healthcare, it's clear this infodemic is a tactic in a broader effort to undermine young people's bodily and reproductive autonomy.

While SRH disinformation schemes have long focused on abortion, contraception is now also a primary target. One study showed more than half of all TikTok videos about hormonal contraception discouraging use. While some misleading videos are well-intentioned personal anecdotes, others are organized online campaigns targeting both young men and women with misinformation about contraception.

Research shows “manosphere” content targets young men with narratives claiming that birth control is emasculating, while young women on TikTok are being routinely exposed to videos falsely framing hormonal contraception as dangerous by falsely linking it to infertility, calling it “poison,” and over-stating side effects. Researchers say the effect of online fearmongering and misinformation about contraception has created a “hormonophobia” crisis, meaning an irrational fear of hormonal contraception.

Anti-abortion “crisis pregnancy centers,” meanwhile, have been found to spread false and misleading information both on the ground and online. While the primary goal of anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centers is to delay, deter, and dissuade pregnant people from accessing abortion, it is important to note the CPC industry is as opposed to contraception as it is to abortion. With millions of public dollars diverted to the CPC industry, the industry invests in digital campaigns targeting young people, with CPC marketing materials recommending targeting kids as young as 11 years old.

The SRH infodemic is working in tandem with the current administration's strategic weakening of public health systems that provide contraception counseling, further suppressing and restricting access to both contraception and accurate information.

Now, the federal government's role in weakening trust in contraception is about to get worse. New guidelines for the Title X program—the only federal family planning program—emphasize that the Administration's priority is to diminish access to the spectrum of contraception in favor of promoting “fertility-based awareness methods.” Worse, the program specifically targets young people's autonomy by requiring Title X participants to commit to encouraging “family participation in the decision of minors to seek” contraception.

Studies have found the infodemic has a direct impact on teen health: Disinformation exposure can deter or delay access to critical reproductive healthcare and correlates with higher-risk behaviors.

Soon, we expect a new bill seeking to mandate evidence-based sexual and reproductive health information in Pennsylvania schools in the state Legislature. The need for evidence-based sex ed is greater than ever to combat the flood of disinformation and help protect young people's reproductive autonomy. We look forward to supporting this legislation and advocating for it to pass into law.

To learn more or to get involved with efforts to support evidence-based sex education and the reproductive autonomy of young people, contact the Women's Law Project at info@womenslawproject.org.



www.womenslawproject.org
infopitt@womenslawproject.org

2026-2027 Save the Dates



Tri-State Area School Study Council

Navigating Difficult Conversations in K-12 Education through a Nonpartisan Lens

September 30, 2026 | Posvar Hall (University of Pittsburgh)

NCAA Update

TBD | 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.

School Board Leadership Collective

TBD

School Board and Distinguished Educator Banquet

Thursday, March 18, 2027 | 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

Thursday, March 25, 2027 | 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 9, 2027 | 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 17, 2027 | Regional Learning Alliance & Zoom

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.*