

## Community and Lifestyles

# School board not addressing budget shortfall

by Art Goldschmidt

When people have talked lately about the State College Area School Board, they focus on whether its schools should take their spring break in the same week as Penn State. But a larger issue looming over their agenda may be the question of how to remove a \$3.6 million deficit from next year's budget.

The school board passed a preliminary General Fund Budget at its Feb. 8 meeting, but July 1 is the deadline for the final 2010-11 budget. Because school district budgets must be balanced, citizens may expect cost-cutting measures, possible fees for participation in sports and use of facilities, and up to a 6.1 percent tax increase on property owners within the school district. School Board President Ann McGlaughlin hopes that the final budget will contain a much lower level of increased taxes.

The major cause for this deficit is the mandated increase in the amount of money the district must pay for retirement pensions

under the Public School Employees Retirement System and health care benefits to its faculty and staff. Pensions and health care costs are both rising, the latter at 12 percent per year. The financial officer of the school district expects the gross outlay in benefits to increase by \$3.6 million in 2010-11 and by \$14 million in 2012-13, due mainly to rising rates of contributions to be made by the district to the PSERS.

As many baby boomers are likely to retire in coming years, PSERS and its companion State Employees Retirement Fund, which supports many retired Penn State employees, will need higher appropriations from the state legislature. Recent reports indicate that Pennsylvania's retirement funds, like those of many other states, have not been funded sufficiently to meet their contractual obligations to retired teachers and other employees. Moreover, pension funds are heavily invested in stocks that have lost value during the recession, and their income from dividends and interest has fallen.

School Director Gowen Roper said that



revenue for the State College Area has "walked off a cliff." Accustomed to a revenue growth of two to three percent in past years, the increase in 2009-10 fell to one percent and is not likely to increase. Pennsylvania Act 1 (2006) limits the percentage increase in property taxes in any given year to the rate of price inflation and the economic conditions prevailing in the

district, unless the district is willing to submit its proposed tax hike to a referendum. It will probably limit the property tax hike to 6.1 percent in 2010. The district may apply for some exceptions, Superintendent Richard Mextorf said, but they are really a deferred payment plan and not sustainable in the long run.

Federal stimulus moneys bridge some of the gap for now, but they will cease in 2011. Pennsylvania's budget crisis has also led to some cuts and to cancelling such programs as "Classrooms for the Future."

The largest budget item is faculty and staff salaries. Most State College Area School district employees are unionized. The contracts for teachers who belong to the Pennsylvania State Education Association, maintenance workers, and administrators belonging to the Pennsylvania Association of Elementary & Secondary School Principals will run until

see Budget, pg. 10

# Cyberbullying takes toll on local students

by Tunomukwathi Asino

The Internet has caused a revolution in the way we live our lives, but the change it has brought about hasn't been all good for the country's youth. Childhood bullying, an enduring ritual in the United States, has migrated online, and "cyberbullying" is on the rise both nationally and locally.

The vast majority of elementary and middle school students in the United States today are comfortable using computers and the Internet and spend much of their free time online, sending instant messages and visiting sites like Facebook and MySpace. Statistics show the Internet has provided kids with another way to bully each other. The National Crime Prevention Council recently reported that 43 percent of teens had been victims of cyberbullying within the last year. Almost 80 percent of teens said that they either didn't have parental rules about Internet use or found ways

around the rules. And only 11 percent of teens talked to parents about incidents of cyberbullying.

There have been several local incidences of cyberbullying. At Park Forest Middle School in State College, an online video was sent out mocking a fellow student. In another example, a survey circulated asking students if a classmate should commit suicide.

Both boys and girls bully, said Dr. Laraine Bortner, a school counselor at Park Forest. Boys tend to be physical, slamming each other against lockers and knocking people's hats off their heads. Girls tend to tease, gossip, spread rumors, eye roll, ignore and exclude.

Bortner said cyberbullying can be just as cruel and—dangerously—more anonymous than its unwired relative. Bystanders are able to reduce bullying by "befriending the target, telling the bully to stop, helping the target to escape by surrounding him or her

with a group or telling a teacher or other adult using the bullying referral system," Bortner said.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association's Web site reports cyberbullying occurs "when a minor is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another minor via use of the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones."

Park Forest is taking procedures to combat bullying. One way is through Park Forest Respects Individual Differences Every Day (PRIDE) program. Through the program "Students are encouraged to become allies and to include those who are left out or bullied" and "to appreciate others who are different, to communicate effectively and to solve problems in positive ways."

Students are taught about respect, appreciation of differences, communication skills and conflict resolution, Bortner said,

"Because students who know each other, learn to like each other and care about each other."

The counseling office also encourages students to use referral cards for students to report bullying anonymously. The school counselors talk to the targets of bullying and the bullies separately. There are also monthly lessons, which involve teachers, support staff and all students.

Bortner said interaction between teachers and students is vitally important to the fight against bullying. She feels it is important for teachers not to allow bullying, and to teach compassion and inclusion of others rather than exclusion.

Even with an anti-bullying program in place, the school still has not been able to eliminate the problem. Park Forest Middle School student Ted (real name not used) is

see Cyber, pg. 10

from Cyber, pg. 9

a victim of bullying.

“This year I got spit on and it felt like I wasn’t getting respect. It was the worst thing I have ever felt. It made me feel like it wasn’t worth living,” Ted said.

He said it happened on the bus and on the bus it happens a lot.

“So, for example, other students mess around with your identity. They say that if you are a boy they say you are a girl; if you say one thing about yourself they say the opposite. What I’m describing is what happens now in middle school, but it happened to me in elementary school on the bus too,” Ted said.

Ted informed someone that he was being bullied.

“I informed both my teachers and counselors. They didn’t do a great deal for the first week and then the principal talked to the kids. Then they stopped very fast,” he said.

Dr. Richard J. Hazler, professor of counselor education and coordinator of the Elementary School Counseling program at Penn State, and Penn State Associate Professor of Education Dr. Jolynn Carney, who have conducted extensive research on bullying, assert bullying has negative consequences on students’ education.

“In general [students] are distracted wor-

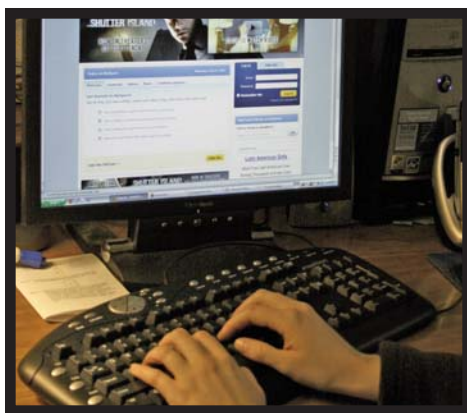


Photo by Tamara Conrad

rying about what might happen next and the result is a negative effect on their education. Sometimes they use their studies to escape, but this generally causes other social and emotional problems,” Hazler said.

Bullying also has an indirect effect on students’ education. Carney said bullying does not affect students’ grades, but their learning and ability to learn. She said they found through their research “that it’s not just kids that are being targeted but also the kids who see it. Bystanders are also negatively impacted—their education process can also be negatively impacted.”

If students don’t speak up, it’s tough for teachers to notice that they are being bullied, Carney said.

“Research has shown that not all teachers are good at noticing that it’s happening in

the classroom. Most teachers tend to pick out who is the bully or who might be the victim, but most bullies are very subtle and don’t want adults to recognize their abusive actions,” Carney said.

Hazler agreed. “Teachers don’t see a lot of what’s going on, but much of that is not their fault. A lot of the bullying that is more damaging is not physical, it is social, verbal and emotional, which are harder to recognize,” he said.

The reasons why children bully are complicated to name. Hazler said reasons vary, adding that it’s usually when a student for whatever reason appears vulnerable to some other person or some other group.

“Vulnerability is the key word or concept,” Carney agreed, “Earlier in the research people would say it’s the kid who looks different—like who has glasses that ends up being bullied—it’s not.”

Hazler said bullies seek control over someone.

“There is no one thing that makes a person look vulnerable, but often it is being socially different, looking or acting a little different and somehow seeming to be a target that will not be able to defend him or herself effectively,” he said.

Carney felt that bullies abuse others for control, sense of power.

“Bullies are good at controlling situations and people. They need very predictable victims and need to know ‘this is how my vic-

tims are going to act,’ that’s who they look for,” she said. She said the longer chronic bullying goes on, the more long-term emotional, social, psychological and even physical problems individuals suffer.

Ted said he feels he was bullied because he “was the easiest target.” He said bullies go for the kid that gets angry quickly.

“I’m different, not a completely totally normal kid. For example, I have long hair; I probably act a little different because my parents are divorced, among other things. I’m also smart and being smart is a problem because the smart kids get it too,” he said.

Students did nothing when Ted was bullied.

“I think they are afraid of being picked on themselves. They could have all ganged up with me to stand up against the bullies,” Ted said of his classmates. “I’m not upset with them. It is kind of annoying, but other than that, I understand. But I don’t like it.”

Ted added that he does not try too hard to make friends with the bullies because they will pretend to be your friend for a while and then they will turn on you. “I think they do it to make themselves feel good,” Ted said.

Although cyberbullying appears to be increasing, Pennsylvania legislation may possibly help reduce bullying. According to

see Cyber, pg. 12

from Budget, pg. 9

2011, but the sports staff contracts expire this year and must be renegotiated.

In order to find items to cut, the administrators and Board must look at all its activities and all staff. “Historically we have found ways to get to ‘yes’ for our students,” Mextorf explained. “We have enjoyed an environment in which we could add programs and staff so that everything is available to everyone—in effect, an economic smorgasbord. Current financial realities are forcing us to move to a well-balanced diet approach.”

Economies being discussed include assessing fees from families of participants in interscholastic sports, raising charges for rental of school facilities, not filling positions vacated by teachers and staff who retire or leave the area, deferring some

maintenance items and bundling some repairs with construction costs of projects that can be funded from the capital budget.

Gowen Roper, a school board member, is philosophically against charging parents for their children’s participation in athletic or other activities, which fees he said would amount to a tax increase for a few parents and would be costly to collect. Raising user fees and rental charges would do little to bridge the budget deficit.

Collapsing a few administrative or teaching positions vacated by resignation or retirement would help reduce the deficit. So would reducing the amount of paper used in the schools, adding online courses as a substitute for paying tuition for children to attend charter schools and moving some items from the general funds budget to the capital budget. Deferring construction or repairs is not a wise economy at present. Interest rates are low, and floating new

bonds (or refinancing existing debt) could reduce costs. Construction costs are now relatively low, so the district should complete new building or improvement projects before those costs rise.

Mextorf has set up a cost control task force to examine ways to reduce costs and raise revenues and invites anyone living in the community to send him their suggestions.





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# Strangers, snow and rehabilitation

by Joel Solkoff

Thanks to a failure to act in January, the Obama administration has made a serious mistake in allowing competitive bidding for durable medical equipment such as oxygen canisters, wheelchairs, power chairs and other devices.

I believe that if President Obama had a Medicare adviser of stature to explain the consequences, Obama would not have made this mistake that will continue to hurt people with disabilities—including me.

As a result of this competitive bidding process, T&B Medical and Dick's Homecare—the only two companies providing power chairs, scooters and other equipment in State College—are in danger of losing to outside competitors, including competitors outside the state. What they are at greatest risk of losing are contracts to provide Medicare recipients such as myself with equipment and maintenance reimbursements. Maintenance is the issue I worry about most.

Some legislators have put together a plan, supported by a sizeable non-partisan group in the House, that would end the bidding process.

One of the authors of the legislation is Rep. Glenn ("GT") Thompson, who represents Pennsylvania's Fifth Congressional district, of which Centre County (his home) is one of 18 counties in a huge, 11,000 square mile district.

I asked Tina Kreisher, Thompson's press secretary, for a 20-minute exclusive tele-



phone interview because I thought we could cover the details on Thompson's health care background so readers can see the link between what our congressman knows and the unsolved problems he is equipped to solve.

Thompson and I spoke by telephone for over an hour on Tuesday, Feb. 9 at 6 p.m. I did not realize the degree of detail we would get involved in, especially since Thompson is himself the father of a disabled Iraqi war veteran. Thompson does not make a practice of talking in public about 22-year-old Logan, who was wounded when shrapnel and explosives caught him by surprise.

He called me from Tucson, Ariz. where he was attending Logan's graduation from Army intelligence training, an experience that filled him with the special gratitude we in the disability community feel when someone we love makes progress toward independence. The two feet of snow in Washington had left him stranded in Tucson and he observed, "There are worse places to be stranded."

Thompson's advancement in health care followed two tracks. Academically, he received a bachelor's degree from Penn State in Therapeutic Rehabilitation, a master's degree from Temple for Health Science Recreation and a certification from

Marywood University in Nursing Home Administration. Meanwhile, Thompson's career involved working in central Pennsylvania as a residential services aid, a recreation therapist and a rehabilitation services manager at Susquehanna Health Services in Williamsport.



Thompson was at one time an orderly at Centre Crest Nursing Home, and for three years cleaned out bed pans, changed patients out of soiled clothes and changed bedding. He worked with his wife Penny, who did similar work as a nursing assistant. At the same time, Thompson's mother was a patient at Centre Crest's Alzheimer's facility.

Glenn Thompson (everyone calls him GT) developed a reputation for good work and excellent managerial abilities, including people skills. When GT visited State College on Labor Day weekend, his charm was evident. He talked about health care in the social hall and bingo parlor (across the hallway from where I am keyboarding this column) of Addison Court, which is an apartment house for senior citizens and those with disabilities. The Congressman arrived for the 8 a.m event just as the Webster's coffee and goodies arrived. (It

helps turnout for these events when food is present and Elaine-Madder Wilgus has been most obliging in providing the coffee Thompson was so grateful to drink.) The 10 additional members of the audience were mostly men and women in their 70s, 80s and 90s.

GT charmed everybody—83-year-old Lillian Huffman, put her hand on my shoulder and said, "I like that fellow" and Lillian is very influential at Addison Court. Win Lillian Huffman and you have won votes at Addison Court. Lillian is a registered republican who voted for Obama.

In my interview with Thompson, I asked about each portion of his 31-year career, which ended when he was supervising 25 rehabilitation specialists and coming up with strategies for improving ongoing rehabilitation.

For me, sitting in a power chair right now, Thompson is the guy to know. I am at a point where I can now go back to rehabilitation to Dr. Colin McCaul, a brilliant rehabilitation physician at Healthcare South, because I recently passed a cardiac stress test. Since I cannot walk, cannot stand without holding on to something and can dislocate my shoulder if I throw my right arm straight in the air, I need a specialist to adapt special exercising tools so I can get the cardiovascular exercise I need. In my considerable experience with physical rehabilitation in three states, the people who do

see Solkoff, pg. 12

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from **Cyber**, pg. 10

Carney, in Pennsylvania there is a law that schools must have anti-bullying programs in place. Having anti-bullying programs provides opportunities for everyone in the schools—students, teachers, administrators, even bus drivers—to have a better understanding of what bullying is.

Carney said intervention in bullying occurs more often now thanks to the programs. “

“I think it’s a lot better than when everybody said, ‘So what...it’s bullying, no big deal, it’s only child’s play,’” she said.

She was inspired to conduct research from a clinical perspective. She was a counselor and worked with students who have attempted suicide. Carney worked with one

from **Solkoff**, pg. 11

the hands-on work, the people who touch my body to show me how to do special exercises, when touching is appropriate (a pat on the back is always useful)—these people are uniformly kind and helpful.

I am impressed by the kind of work Glenn Thompson did and taught other rehabilitation specialists how to do. Based on his experience, his testimonials, his conversation and his education, I feel sufficiently trusting to put my exercise program in his hands if he has time.

Obama, the president I helped elect, is doing some truly bad things to Medicare that will have severely negative effects on the disabled. They have potentially disastrous affects on me. I use my power chair frequently; I require battery replacements every six months. What if the competitive bidding process the Obama administration is implementing results in requiring me to get batteries from an out-of-area supplier and I have to wait too long?

Right now, Travis would be right over with the batteries. With competitive bidding, I have to depend on some anonymous supplier. During that wait, if my batteries

student fresh out of in-patient hospitalization for a suicide attempt. She found that one of the major issues that led him to the attempt was that he was bullied.

“I asked, ‘What can I do? How can I help him? What kind of inventions [will it take]?’” Carney said.

Hazler was a teacher and counselor for many years and often dealt with bullying. He said around 1989, a faculty member in

special education asked him for advice about a student who was being bullied.

“I offered counseling advice, but as we talked realized that there was little information available on the topic,” Hazler said. “So we wrote an article saying people should do research on this and then followed up with that research.” That research is now helping to prevent bullying and saves lives nationally.

won’t take a charge and I soil my bed repeatedly, I might have to move to Centre Crest, which would severely limit my opportunities.

The failure of the Obama administration to reach across the aisle, as it promised to do, is shocking when Glenn Thompson’s special knowledge is going to waste. At the time of my interview with Rep. Thompson on Feb. 6, the president had yet to announce a director for Medicare and Medicaid. Medicare is the largest health insurance company in the United States. Medicare needs an administrator who can be confirmed by the Senate. Thompson would be

confirmed by the Senate. Or, President Obama, please find him a better job. Or wake up the Republican House Leadership and have him put on the Ways and Means Committee where he will have a better opportunity to get things done. Given the overwhelming republican composition of the Fifth Congressional District, Thompson will eventually gain the seniority he needs. I don’t want to wait. I want Thompson’s special skills available to me now because I believe he can assure me a more secure future.

—Joel Solkoff, author of “The Politics of Food” can be reached at his Voices blog

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