

QCSD lobbies, learns about political process

A district contingent visited the state Capitol as part of Advocacy Day.

By Gary Weckselblatt

It's not often that students get an opportunity to meet a governor. So when Quakertown Community High School Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner was leading a tour around the executive offices in the state Capitol, and Gov. Tom Wolf appeared at the other end of the hallway, Harner knew what he had to do.

"We have Quakertown students," Harner said. "Governor, can you say hello?"

As the governor walked over, QCHS video production students Justin Leyden and Ryan Suida captured the mo-



Gov. Tom Wolf speaks with QCSD students, from right, Morgan Small, Ben Wackerman and Kaylee Qualteria while Stephen Kimball and Lincoln Kaar listen in.

ment on camera. Wolf shook hands with seniors Kaylee Qualteria, Morgan Small and Ben Wackerman, and asked about their college plans.

"We weren't really expecting that to happen," Ben said. "It was really cool."

The trip to Harrisburg was part of Advocacy Day in the state Capitol. Harner was the only superintendent who brought students with him, said Stephen Kimball, an assistant principal at the high school. School Board members Mitch Anderson and Ron Jackson and high school teacher Lincoln Kaar were also part of the contingent.

"Our students are going to be tomorrow's leaders," Harner said. "I wanted them to get a feel for how government works, the proximity of the governor's executive offices in comparison to where the legislative work is done in the House and Senate. Now, they're that much further along in their young lives."

On Advocacy Day, a variety of organizations gather to lobby lawmakers on behalf of their cause. Quakertown was there in support of education funding, along with the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units

The PSBA, which advises school offi-

cials on how advocacy makes a difference in the legislative process, had packets of information available, including its [2018 State of Education](#) report.

The report includes statistics gathered from publicly available data sources as well as December 2017 survey responses from school principals and districts, career and technology centers, and intermediate unit chief school administrators. The report delves into school finances, student achievement, budget pressures and educational equity.

The [top three challenges](#) for districts were identified as budget pressures (83 percent), implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (24 percent) and school construction/maintenance (22 percent). Pension costs (82 percent), charter school payments (52 percent) and special education costs (37 percent) were identified as the top budget challenges.

The report found that districts balanced their budgets by using their fund balance (76 percent), raising property taxes (75 percent), increasing class sizes (40 percent), reducing staff (36 percent) and reducing programs and services (30 percent).



Quakertown Community School Board member Ron Jackson, left, traveled the state Capitol with Rebecca Roberts-Malamis, assistant to Bucks County Intermediate Unit Executive Director Mark Hoffman, right, and Pennridge school Director Ada Miller.

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The report also compares individual districts to the state average. It shows that [Quakertown](#) receives 24.1 percent of its funding from the state, compared to the average of 36.7 percent. That's the primary reason QCSD needs nearly 75 percent of its monies from local sources, compared to the average of 57.2 percent.

The district also spends more on regular (\$13,462) and special education (\$26,539) students in comparison to the state averages of (\$11,306) and (\$24,192).

According to the report, fewer students leave QCSD for charter schools compared to its state counterparts, 2.6 percent to Pennsylvania's 7.8 percent average.

"Public education in Pennsylvania is a \$30 billion ticket," Harner said. "Half of that money comes from the state. Too much money is being peeled off for vouchers and for-profit public schools.

"With all of the contentious issues out there, and the demands on the state and the state demands on school districts, it's important to have a good relationship with your local legislators. Even if how they voted does not support public education."

Which is why the Quakertown crew spent time with Sen. Bob Mensch and watched the House Education Committee, which includes Rep. Craig Staats, go through a series of votes.

"The students saw government work the way it should," said Kimball, a former political science teacher. "There was no screaming. It was actually kind of boring, but it's working."

He said it was important for the students to see the legislative process and how committees work "as opposed to just reading about it."

The Quakertown students are involved in the the district's Model UN program, in which they act as political figures and learn how government operates. So viewing the process in real time "was a really good experience," Kaylee said. "We learned a lot."

Morgan, who plans to major in political science or international relations in college, said "You start to realize how important public education is, and we take it for granted. So much goes into what we do here. There are so many different committees, and we got to see how each representative had to listen to their constituents. We met people for public education, we met people who are pro charter school. There was a lot to see."

Ben, who said he's never been inside the Capitol building saw "how crazy government life is. People are lobbying to get their voices heard. There's only so much money to go

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Sen. Andy Dinniman, left, addresses the Quakertown visitors, including Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner, Board members Mitch Anderson and Ron Jackson, assistant principal Stephen Kimball and students Morgan Small, Ben Wackerman and Kaylee Qualteria.

around. Personally, it was pretty eye-opening."

Jackson, the School Board's legislative representative, split time with the Quakertown crowd and a group from the Bucks County Intermediate Unit.

"It's nice to be able to sit down and talk face to face with your representative and other representatives," he said. "They certainly listened and heard what our concerns were. Sen. Mensch was especially generous with his time for us."

Jackson said topics included, [Senate Bill 76](#), the Property Tax Independence Act; [Senate Bill 2](#), Education Savings Accounts for Students in Underperforming School; pension reform, special education and Pre-K funding.

"This is part of my responsibility, which is keeping up to date with key legislation in Harrisburg and in Washington, D.C., to determine how it would impact the district," Jackson said.

Following the information-packed day, Kimball said he hoped that when the students got home and their parents asked "How was school today?" they didn't just say, "Oh, you know, the usual."

"They got to meet the governor of Pennsylvania," he said. "That's a pretty big deal."

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