

East Cobber

ECCC PTA Article

October 2015

Understanding Current Education Reform Proposals is a Community Responsibility

As parents, we have countless opportunities to improve the educational experience for our children and their classmates. We volunteer in the media center, in classrooms and at school events. We raise funds for educational software, class field trips, educational materials and other instructional needs. We serve on local PTA boards and councils. By doing these things, we are advocating for our own children and the children in our schools. But it is important as community members to advocate for students throughout East Cobb, the state of Georgia and the nation.

It starts with a mission. PTA is one of the largest advocacy organizations in the nation. Its Mission is: *To make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.* On the national level, PTA is actively involved with federal policy makers; here at home, your local PTAs are hard at work educating family members and the community on local and statewide issues.

The East Cobb County Council PTA (ECCC PTA) is committed to understanding key education policy issues both here at home and across the state. Our main goal is to ensure that every child has an opportunity for a high-quality education. What can we do to ensure public education serves the needs of *all* of Georgia's children?

In order to effectively advocate, we must be informed about statewide policy issues and understand how they impact public education. During the ECCC PTA Fall General Meeting and Priority Committee Fair on September 8, 2015, the ECCC PTA hosted a small panel discussion, "Georgia Education Reform Progress." The panel featured Georgia Senator Lindsey Tippins, Cobb County School District Superintendent Chris Ragsdale and Dickerson Middle School Principal, Dr. Carole Brink.

The Georgia Education Reform Progress panel provided ECCC PTA members and guests with insight into issues that state policymakers, including the state legislature, will be reviewing this coming year. These issues include a potential departure from the Quality Budget Education (QBE) formula (the current state student education funding formula), offering students more choice among public school options, permitting students to "Move on When Ready," increasing local school and district control, and recruiting and retaining the best teachers. These topics are currently in front of the Georgia Education Reform Commission (Commission), which has the purpose of evaluating proposals to improve Georgia's educational system. The panelists addressed these topics as experienced leaders in the education field, and as either a member of the Commission (Senator Tippins) or members of the Education Advisory Board (Superintendent Ragsdale and Dr. Brink).

In general, it was evident from the panel discussion that it is extremely important for education policy changes to be assessed carefully and thoroughly, as the goal is nothing less than for all of our students to have greater academic performance and increased opportunities to succeed. On the issue of education funding, the panelists commented that it is premature to assess whether a different formula

from the QBE will be preferable, because the Commission has not completed its assessment of it, but that the current QBE would be fine as long it is funded to provide the resources to meet individual student needs. The panelists identified items for which improved QBE funding is needed including, but not limited to, technology advances that improve educational delivery, teacher healthcare and retirement, and funds to respond to the recruitment and retention of the best teachers. Also addressed was an issue that has been a constant for the past several years – state austerity cuts to education funding. State education funding dollars have increased as the economy has improved, BUT fully funding education should remain a high priority.

With respect to expanding public school options, the panelists recommended that it is essential to consider the practical operation of school choice options – such as providing student transportation, the hiring of the appropriate number of teachers and staff, and ensuring that physical classroom space is available, among other logistical requirements. (Note that some public school choice options are already available in Cobb County – through a school lottery and magnet high schools.) In general, the panelists expressed support for the Move On When Ready program. This program permits students to use traditional educational instruction, online resources, more flexible testing opportunities and other educational tools to “move on to the next level of educational instruction or completion” as a student has mastered each level and not be tied to traditional progressive timelines. The panelists cautioned that it is important to consider the social and maturity levels of the student, to be sure that the student is actually ready to “move on.” The panelists expressed approval for increased flexibility and control, noting that the Cobb County School District already operates under a state IE2, Investment in Educational Excellence contract, which allows freedom to foster new opportunities to personalize learning and prepare students for their future.

In closing remarks, the panelists highlighted that it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, particularly in high-needs subject areas such as math, science and special education, which must remain a significant priority for education policy makers, as it is vital to the future of our education system. Clear from the discussion was the panelists’ dedication to improving student academic performance, and that there is no simple formula to adequately address the multi-faceted needs that surround school funding.

The ECCC PTA encourages all citizens to stay informed about these issues, discuss them with other community members and share opinions with the Board of Education members and legislative representatives. These issues are important to the quality of education in our schools, in the County and in the State. The Education Reform Commission is currently considering reform proposals and must report to the Governor by December 2015. For further information see the Commission website (<http://gov.georgia.gov/education-reform-commission>). To stay informed on all PTA related legislative activities, the ECCC PTA recommends signing up for Capitol Watch (<http://www.georgiapta.org/issues-action/capitol-watch/>)/

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