

Centennial officials: Change school funding, mandates

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, June 4, 2014 6:00 pm

Two Centennial School District officials criticized for-profit charter schools, the state's special education funding formula and unfunded mandates for putting public education in a perilous situation.

"We are struggling to provide an adequate education to students because of pensions, unfunded mandates and tests that don't measure learning," said Joyce Mundy, Centennial's superintendent.

Mark Miller, vice president of the Centennial School Board and a member of several other education organizations, said, "We want to be able to balance our budgets without breaking the backs of taxpayers, without cutting programs for students, without reducing personnel."

With the General Assembly working on a new budget that's nearly \$1.8 billion in the red, the two education leaders spoke with the editorial board of the Bucks County Courier Times on Wednesday about the plight public school districts are facing.

While Gov. Tom Corbett has proposed an additional \$241 million for education, Miller doesn't believe that funding will be forthcoming.

His biggest criticism, however, was reserved for "competition and choice" in public education.

"We are opposed to the unjust enrichment of the operators of the charter schools," said Miller, director of the Network for Public Education; co-chair of the Keystone State Education Coalition; and BuxMont region director of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

"Private enterprise is calling the shots in education," he said. "A proliferation of companies said 'We can make money in this.' "

As Miller pushed his perspective, members of the Courier Times editorial board suggested area residents were on the verge of a "taxpayer rebellion," because of rising school taxes and said the arrival of charter schools coincided with the failure of public schools in major cities like Philadelphia. The situation heated up when the economy tanked, board members said, and job losses crippled the private sector. Taxpayers took offense when teachers, already with great perks, went on strike and demanded higher salaries.

Miller and Mundy said they understood the frustration.

The Centennial school board passed the last teachers contract in a 5-4 vote even though "we knew we couldn't afford it," Miller said. Later, Centennial's teachers union offered to redo the deal.

"They said 'We get it, you were right. We know we can't afford it,' " Miller said. The union agreed to spread out pay raises over four years instead of two.

“There are concessions being made around the state,” he said, including the elimination of step increases.

Besides his knocks at for-profit schools, Miller also said the state needs to change the way it funds special education for charter schools. Districts pay charter schools an average of what it costs to educate a special education student. However, he said, charters only “recruit” students with minimal learning disabilities, while public schools by law are required to educate everyone.

He pointed to legislation by state Rep. Bernie O’Neill, R-29, Warminster, as a way to fix the problem.

House Bill 2138 would establish a new special education funding formula that includes the use of three cost categories for students receiving special education services, ranging from least intensive to most intensive. The measure would also apply the same basic funding principles for public school districts to charter schools, with the distribution of new funding to be phased in over three years; adjustments for local costs differentials; and substantiation by charters for costs to educate students in special education categories two and three.

While the bill passed the House Education Committee in a 24-1 vote, it hasn’t advanced for a full House vote.

Also, both Mundy and Miller said they have no use for the Keystone exams. Mundy said Centennial classrooms spend 110 of 182 school days on testing-related activities. That time has increased 75 percent in the last three years, she added.

“We are cutting programs, cutting staff,” she said. “In my 20 years in education, I have never seen the strain on school districts (as seen now).”

Miller said Carolyn Dumaresq, the acting secretary of education, has said the Keystones “don’t work.”

“These exams don’t measure the success of a school,” he said.