September 2009

Alliance for Quality Education

AQE In Action

In communities across New York State, the Alliance for Quality Education is winning local victories to improve our schools, advancing a statewide agenda centered around accountability and fair funding, and building a strong movement for educational justice.

This is the first of what will be a quarterly newsletter. It provides snapshots of AQE's grassroots organizing and advocacy across the state to ensure that all children have access to learning opportunities and a quality education. We encourage you to forward it to your friends, colleagues, neighbors, and family.

A New Commissioner, A New Opportunity

On October 1, New York State will have its first new Commissioner of Education in 14 years, David Steiner. AQE is spearheading an effort to put the concerns of parents and community members on Dr. Steiner's agenda and ensure that they have a seat at the table.

Thus far, nearly 100 organizations and leaders have endorsed our "Sound Basic Education Covenant," which contains principles and priorities for Dr. Steiner and a request that he engage parents and community members in providing accountability and input.

On October 1, AQE will hold press conferences in communities across the state, highlighting our local platforms and calling for Dr. Steiner to ensure that the State Education Department is responsive to our concerns.

If you are a member of a PTA, school committee, or any other community group, we invite you to endorse the Covenant. Click here to download an endorsement form.

State Budget Alert

In the coming weeks, Governor Paterson will bring the legislature back for a special session to make mid-year budget cuts to close a $2.1 billion revenue shortfall. AQE is calling on the governor not to propose cuts to education, and for the legislature to reject education cuts if he does propose them.

Unfortunately, this year's budget doesn't include any of the additional school funding the State was obligated to provide under the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) court settlement. Instead, the budget "levels" funding for education, which is actually a cut when inflation is taken into account.

To make sure that our kids' schools will be safe from the chopping block we must send a clear message to the governor and our state legislators: "No cuts to education!" Click HERE to send a letter

Long Island: Victory on Local Reforms

Over 60 people joined AQE at a barbecue to celebrate our victory on local school reforms.

AQE is celebrating the winning of important school reforms in Wyandanch, a Long Island community.

For years, residents have been concerned about the need for transparency throughout the Board of Education. Frustration turned to action when AQE galvanized a committee of parents and community members to develop a platform containing reforms to prevent nepotism and conflicts of interest in district hiring.

In June, the committee presented the policies to the Board of Education, followed by handwritten letters and phone calls from parents, grandparents, students, and community members. The Wyandanch Union Free District adopted "anti- nepotism" and "conflict of interest" policies on September 16th.

New York City: Mayoral Control

AQE played a leading role in the Campaign for Better Schools, a coalition of over 30 parent and community groups, seeking checks and balances, increased transparency and greater public involvement in mayoral control. For more than a year, we helped organize rallies, testified at hearings, held press events, issued fact sheets and reports, and met with legislators.

While we were not successful in efforts to reform the Panel for Educational Policy, we did win a number of important reforms such as the Parent and Student Outreach and Training Center which will provide training, resources, and information to help parents and students make a difference in their schools, independent audits of the DOE programs by the Independent Budget Office and financial audits by the comptroller, as well as requirements for superintendents to focus on districts only.

Dozens of parents, youth, and community members delivered 10,000 postcards in support of school governance reforms to Senator Malcolm Smith's office in Queens.

Rochester: Mobilizing Against Teacher Layoffs

AQE mobilized thousands of Rochester residents to speak out against the superintendent's firing of dozens of city school teachers.

Concerned that fewer teachers will result in an abundance of crowded classrooms, community members have packed school board meetings, held rallies and press conferences, generated hundreds of emails and phone calls, and circulated a petition – signed by over 2,000 people – urging the School Board to pass a cap on classroom sizes.

The School Board heard the demands of the community and decided to take up our class size cap proposal in the Policy Committee. In the meantime, we held a forum for School Board candidates to educate the public about the candidates' views on the class size issue.

Students helped AQE pack a School Committee meeting to support a cap on classroom sizes.

Syracuse: Success in Expanding Pre-K

Children, parents, and community leaders celebrate pre-k funding victory.

Children in Syracuse are benefitting from full day pre-k thanks to the hard work of AQE and our allies.

After this year's $75 million statewide pre-k funding cut, the Syracuse AQE chapter launched a citywide campaign to ensure that the city budget would include additional money for pre-k children. The group conducted surveys, posted flyers, held meetings with educators, administrators, the superintendent and city officials, and held a press event over a short span of only three weeks.

A victory was secured when the city budget passed with a $250,000 increase to expand 100 half-day pre-k slots to full day. Noted Tanika Jones, AQE's Syracuse organizer, "This was a huge victory for Syracuse children and the community as a whole. Studies show that children who attend full day pre-k perform better later on in school."

Buffalo: Preventing School Violence

AQE is spearheading a campaign to help prevent school violence in Buffalo by instituting a district-wide universal dress code for students.

Currently, there are 34 schools with different dress codes in the city, leading to students being targeted based on their uniform color.

Parents and students have collected over 1,000 signatures thus far on a petition in support of a universal dress code. Click here for a positive article on the campaign in the Buffalo News. Our support among elected officials is growing, including Demone Smith, Chair of the Masten District Common Council's Education Committee, and Mary Ruth Kapsiak, School Board Member.

Adreanna Jamesion is a high school freshman in Buffalo this year. She came into the AQE office to send emails to her friends in support of the universal

Get involved! Contact your regional AQE office:

Albany **518-465-4600**
Buffalo **716-855-1522**
Long Island **516-541-1006**
New York City **718-222-1089**
Rochester **585-288-4693**
Syracuse **315-435-2480**
Central Office **518-432-5315**

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We welcome your feedback on both the newsletter and our work! Please send comments to Nikki Jones, Communications Coordinator: njones@aqeny.org