

2010 Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Candidates Address Afterschool Issues

Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development (PSAYDN) recently invited the gubernatorial candidates to share their thoughts on afterschool programming in Pennsylvania and its potential direction under their leadership. Republican candidate Tom Corbett, Democratic candidate Dan Onorato and Democratic candidate Jack Wagner responded. **Here are the candidates' positions in their own words...**

PSAYDN: A 2009 poll conducted by the Afterschool Alliance found that just 9 percent of Pennsylvania's K-12 children participate in afterschool programs and that 87 percent of Pennsylvania adults surveyed believe there should be some type of organized activity for young people after school. **How can the demand for afterschool programs be met?**

Tom Corbett: *Education funding overall must be tailored according to an individual district's need. The tailoring process should include a comprehensive assessment of the profile of the served community, considering economic indicators and where state dollars can have the greatest impact in terms of creating opportunities for at-risk students. Some existing programs, such as the Communities That Care initiative, already employ an analysis of community risk factors in order to prioritize available resources.*

Considering that Pennsylvania will likely continue to face significant budgetary pressures, all sources of public funding should employ similar research-based targeting of investments.

Leveraging greater participation from private donors, businesses and grants from nonprofit organizations will be crucial to make significant enhancements in program availability. The next administration can be an advocate in communicating to nonpublic entities that every participant in the community has a direct interest in improving educational opportunities. Encouraging direct investments and supporting incentives such as the EITC program will be necessary to provide long-term sustainability.

Dan Onorato: *After-school programs are extremely valuable, and we should support them by providing school districts with adequate resources to invest in proven programs like these as well as by encouraging the business community and non-profit sector to work with schools in forming school-community partnerships.*

Jack Wagner: *As a preliminary matter, let me say that I wholeheartedly agree with your organization's slogan that afterschool programs "keep kids safe, inspire learning and help working families." I am particularly interested in the use of afterschool programs to reduce Pennsylvania's high school drop-out rate, which is one of my priorities as Governor. I believe that one of the best things that we can do for our young people is to make sure that they stay in school. It also benefits our state as a whole. Studies have shown that states with higher graduation rates have lower crime rates and lower expenditures for corrections, social services, and welfare programs.*

As both a public official and a parent, I have always placed a priority on education. As a State Senator for ten years, I fought to increase the Commonwealth's share of education costs and distribute those resources more fairly among the state's school districts. As a member of the Senate Democratic leadership and the Senate Appropriations Committee, I helped pass Governor Rendell's education plan, which provided significant increases for basic and special education and funded reforms such as early childhood education, full-day kindergarten, tutoring, and lower class sizes.

As Auditor General, my cyclical audits of school districts and other public school entities have determined whether state and local tax dollars are spent wisely and identified waste, fraud, or abuse of funds, resulting in more funds being available to be redirected to the classroom. My audits of state government programs and agencies in general have identified hundreds of millions of dollars that could be saved in the state budget by improving the management of various programs and services.

As Governor, I will implement my audit recommendations and other ideas in order to generate significant savings that could be used to provide funding for priorities such as afterschool programs. I would also encourage the private and charitable sectors to support afterschool programs in their communities. A focus on the benefits of quality afterschool programs for the students involved and for the Commonwealth as a whole – in terms of an educated workforce, lower crime, reduced social services cost, etc. – would strengthen public support for such programs and, in turn, enable a greater number of Pennsylvania families to participate.

PSAYDN: The Afterschool Alliance poll found that 83 percent of Pennsylvania adults surveyed support public funding for afterschool programs. In addition, national research shows that children and youth who participate in afterschool

programs demonstrate better student achievement levels, classroom behavior and engage in less risky behaviors that could have life-altering consequences. **Do you support public funding for afterschool programs?**

Tom Corbett: *Throughout my career in public service, I have maintained that public investments in early intervention and prevention will result in long-term savings on rehabilitation and corrections. Afterschool programs can empower students and families with more personalized educational options to help students excel and meet high expectations. However, budgetary constraints projected for the next few fiscal years will result in very limited availability of resources. The EITC should be protected as a tool to secure funding for afterschool programs. Increased investments from other entities such as nonprofits and private businesses will also be crucial to protect program sustainability.*

Dan Onorato: *Yes, and my Plan for Pre-K–12 Education specifically calls for using state resources such as the school funding formula based on the Legislature’s Costing-Out Report to fund programs that increase student engagement including after-school programs.*

Jack Wagner: *Yes. Please see my answer to the previous question. I would be especially interested in targeting any additional public funds to quality afterschool programs for high school students, which have not received as much public support as programs for younger children, as a means of addressing the high school drop-out rate.*

PSAYDN: *As with all programs that engage children and youth, quality matters in afterschool programs. **Should the Commonwealth incentivize programs to improve the quality of afterschool programs in the Commonwealth?***

Tom Corbett: *The Commonwealth should be a partner in the improvement of all educational services across the state. The state can help improve the quality of afterschool programs through the identification of best practices and focusing state resources on programs based on research with demonstrated success.*

Dan Onorato: *Absolutely. I will ensure that every program funded with taxpayer dollars is effective. In addition, since after-school programs can have such a positive impact on drop-out prevention, encouraging healthy behavior and academic success, it is essential that we make after-school programs as impactful as possible. A voluntary quality improvement recognition system like Keystone STARS is an approach that I believe deserves consideration.*

Jack Wagner: *Yes. This is particularly important for the programs that serve teenagers, who face a number of competing interests and pressures, some of which are not positive (for example, experimentation with drugs).*

I would also provide an incentive to the students themselves. One of my top priorities as Governor is to create a HOPE (Helping Our Pupils to Excel) Scholarship program to make higher education affordable for Pennsylvania students who attend Pennsylvania colleges and universities. Students who graduate from high school with at least a 3.0 grade point average would have their tuition paid for at a state-owned university. Students choosing to attend a state-related institution (Penn State, Pitt, Temple, and Lincoln universities), a private institution, a community college, or a vocational-technical school would receive a scholarship valued at the average cost of a state-owned university. The program would be funded by excess profits from table games at Pennsylvania casinos. Quality afterschool programs would help students stay on track so that they can earn the GPA needed to qualify for the scholarships.

PSAYDN: A 2009 report from the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee on the availability of afterschool programs in the Commonwealth recommended the creation of a Statewide Afterschool Coordinating Council consisting of representatives from state agencies, legislator's afterschool network providers, key advocacy groups, foundations and others engaged in afterschool. The Council would perform various functions to improve quality, provide incentives for collaboration, develop models for staff recruitment and assess local needs and barriers, among other tasks. **Would you support the creation of such a council?**

Tom Corbett: *I would support the creation of a council with a major focus on identifying best practices for afterschool programs and maximizing the return on available resources.*

Dan Onorato: *Yes, and for the reasons you cite, I call for the creation of a Statewide After-School Coordinating Council in my Plan for Pre-K–12 Education.*

Jack Wagner: *Yes. I welcome PSAYDN's input regarding appointments to the Council and the substance of the Council's work.*

PSAYDN: How can the Commonwealth help rural children and youth access quality afterschool programs?

Tom Corbett: *Funding available to our rural school districts must be flexible enough to allow administrators and educators to design an array of educational options that can evolve with the unique needs of the community. Significant demand in a given district – or a series of contiguous districts – should drive greater local control of how to set aside resources to prioritize needed educational programs. The Department of Education should be a partner with rural districts in designing customized funding plans. The next administration should also encourage multi-district coordination and pooling of resources to collaborate on regional programs, including afterschool services, where this is an identified demand.*

Dan Onorato: *Rural children face unique challenges in accessing quality after-school programs because of greater distance and, in some cases, less access to a robust network of community partners. In those cases, we need to provide increased technical assistance from the state and find ways to be creative in bringing together non-profits, members of the business community and other partners.*

Jack Wagner: *As discussed in my answer to the first question above, we must engage the public, private, and charitable sectors to ensure that quality afterschool programs are available for families in all parts of Pennsylvania.*

PSAYDN: In some areas of the Commonwealth, parents have access to comprehensive information systems to help them find afterschool programs that meet their needs, but in many communities around the state they do not. **How can we assure that all parents across the Commonwealth have access to this type of information to help them make informed choices about afterschool for their children?**

Tom Corbett: *Engagement of parents in the educational process is necessary to ensure the best possible outcome for Pennsylvania's students, regardless of the type of school in which he or she is enrolled. As Attorney General, I have created a series of programs designed to involve parents in helping their children make safe and informed life choices. These programs and afterschool services share a mutual goal: to provide Pennsylvania's children with the tools necessary to meet challenges with a high degree of achievement and success. As governor, I will bring the priority of parental involvement to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The next administration should ensure that the Department is as much of a resource for empowering parents as it is for our school administrators. The Department should serve as a central clearinghouse for a comprehensive array of information about all educational resources in Pennsylvania. Combined with a robust parental outreach effort, the state can help all ensure that available programs are fully utilized.*

Dan Onorato: *Outreach is a significant challenge, and it is essential to reaching the families who most need quality after-school services. I would look to model programs and replicate successful approaches, and it is precisely to address this kind of task that the Coordinating Council will be most helpful.*

Jack Wagner: *Please see my answer to the previous question. Technology can play an important role in providing widespread access to information about afterschool programs so that families can make informed decisions.*