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POTENTIAL ISSUES TO WATCH IN THE 2013-2014 SCHOOL YEAR**Overview**

Over the past decade I have published ten monthly CEPI commentaries for each school year devoted to topics having an impact on local school board policy makers, school administrators, and classroom teachers. I encourage the reader to consult the *Index to Prior Issues* for a complete listing of previous editions. In keeping with past practice the final (June) commentary for the 2012-2013 school year is devoted to predicting “potential legal and policy issues” to watch next school year—a risky business to say the least.

Potential Issues: 2013-2014

Based on my research, professional experience, and observations the topics discussed in the paragraphs below represent my predictions for issues to watch in the 2013-2014 school year.

School Safety and Security: Never in my fifty-plus years in education have I been so shocked, sorrowed, and left speechless as I was when I heard of the horrible, senseless, and wanton slaughter of innocent little children and heroic adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown Connecticut. While I have in the past written about and made presentations on student safety and security, it has taken me this long to be able to even mention the Sandy Hook tragedy in one of my commentaries. This is my first attempt to do so.

Over the past several months much has been written and excellent suggestions have been made by so many others to keep this from ever happening again. Two things remain constant among these suggestions. In 2013 - 2014, Sandy Hook can not be forgotten and local school districts must continue to do all that can be done to make school buildings safer and more secure for children and employees. Below are some of my reactions to suggestions made by experts.

While I am not in favor of arming and training principals and/or teachers, I am much in favor of having armed police officers (either physically present or on immediate call), employed by local police departments and serving as school resource officers (SRO), in every public school. I am also in favor of improving direct and immediate communication capabilities in school buildings; requiring that every visitor (including parents) to

school buildings report to the main office and show official picture identification; require visitors to sign in and wear an official visitor pass while in the building; placing and continuously monitoring surveillance cameras placed at each entrance to school buildings; locking doors to prevent individuals from entering school buildings; and training staff to be constantly on alert and immediately report to the main office the presence of strangers on school grounds and/or in school buildings. In 2013-2014, each of these suggested strategies and others will require careful review by school system legal counsel as policy and implementation implications (including privacy and fiscal implications) are certain to raise issues in the community.

School Budgets: As highlighted in last year's final commentary one prediction for next year remains exactly the same. In 2013-2014, the school system budget will serve as a major issue producer. As we know, the availability or lack thereof of funding profoundly impacts on every aspect of local school system maintenance and operation. As the recent past demonstrates, rising costs coupled with shrinking sources of federal, state, and local funding have changed the way local school systems do business.

In 2013-2014, the lack of dollars available to run local schools will continue to have a profound impact on hiring, allocation, and retention of professional staff and support staff. In addition, new federal health care requirements and the rising cost of such items as fuel for school buses, electricity, water, and sanitation, will force school officials to make sweeping "red pen" decisions. Local school officials will continue to resort to such cost cutting strategies as not filling vacant positions; decreasing the number of central office and school building administrative staff positions; requiring employee unpaid furloughs; implementing lay-offs; hiring more part-time and temporary staff ("temps"); closing school buildings; increasing student enrollment in classes; and eliminating after-school extra-curricular activities—especially school sports teams. In 2013-2014, the implementation of such strategies will raise serious community concerns and policy issues will dominate often "heated discussions" at local school board meetings.

Special Education: In 2013-2014, the number of school age children with educational disabilities will continue to grow. As of this writing the United States Congress has yet to reauthorize the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA 2004), thus leaving that statute basically the same. However, at the same time the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has published the *DSM V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)* the primary and definitive reference manual source used by clinicians. This new edition represents the first significant up-date of the *DSM* in almost twenty years. In a recent news release, while the APA announced the removal of some disorders and the addition and/or broadening of others, it highlighted a "reshuffling and renaming of autistic disorders." Suffice it to say, in 2013-2014, major changes in the *DSM*, and the questionable status of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), coupled with the current status of *IDEA* (2004), likely will cause confusion requiring caution and a constant monitoring and reexamination of existing policies and procedures in place in local public school systems.

At the same time school systems will see an escalation by parent advocate groups to keep parent rights at the forefront as demands for programs, related services, and placements increase—especially for children identified as eligible on the autism disabilities spectrum. Issues are likely to spring up.

Student Diversity: In 2013-2014, local school systems will continue to experience an expanding population of incoming students from non-English speaking countries. Differences in language and culture will continue to require changes in traditional instructional modalities and methodologies—requiring school system administrative and instructional staff to constantly revisit and revise the way in which they communicate, teach, discipline, and relate to students. At the same time the need for local school systems to regularly communicate and formally cooperate with other local governmental agencies (e.g., social services, community health, mental

health, child welfare, juvenile and domestic relations courts) will grow. In my view, in 2013-2014, legal and policy issues will emerge as the notion of “special services and accommodations” expands and reaches beyond existing boundaries. In 2013-2014 education will function as just one key aspect of a more comprehensive package of “family-related services.”

Student Discipline: Two areas of student discipline will carry over from last year and provide school officials with issues in 2013-2014. These areas are *bullying* and, related to that, *student peer harassment* involving the use of computers and other electronic communication. In the past student bullies would more often than not resort to in-person name calling and physical intimidation to harass their selected victims. However, while such traditional bullying tactics still exist, in today’s youth culture, where very few students (elementary, middle, and secondary school) are without a cell phone and/or some other form of electronic medium, student peer bullying (including sexual harassment) has grown and will continue to grow through the use of electronic/social media means—e.g., smart phones, the internet, e-mails, tweets, text messaging, Facebook, blogs, chat rooms, YouTube, My Space, *ad nauseam*. In my view legal and policy issues involving students communicating electronically with other students will abound in 2013-2014, and will serve as the major student disciplinary challenge facing local school boards and school administrators—especially because many student-to-student communications have their origin off-school grounds.

Administrator and Teacher Contracts: In 2013-2014, the “contract status” debate will continue. Tenure or continuing contract status where they exist will remain under attack. Advocates for eliminating tenure status—especially for school principals and classroom teachers, and establishing three-to-five year, performance based contracts—will continue to stress *accountability* for student academic achievement and school improvement as they actively lobby state legislative bodies to make this happen. Advocates characterize tenure status as an impediment to change. In 2013-2014 advocates will continue to say that school boards need the legal authority and freedom to summarily fire ineffective principals and teachers and replace them with high performing staff members (under performance based contracts) and not have to deal with tenure status. Add to this the continuing debate over merit pay (*i.e.*, pay for performance) and legal and policy issues are inevitable—especially in states where union negotiated contracts are in play.

Increasing Federal Influence: In 2013-2014 we will continue to see efforts at the federal level to: (1) increase the number of *nationally accredited* teachers in local classrooms; (2) establish in each state a *core curriculum*; and (3) increase efforts by USDOE to implement several aspects of the *Race to the Top Initiative* (RTTI). In my view local public school boards will witness a growing tension between state authority (based on Tenth Amendment grounds) and the federal government (through USDOE) in matters of controlling public education—especially in matters of curriculum content and instructional sequence. Federal initiatives and mandates, absent adequate funding, will once again create “heated debate” at the local level where the responsibility to implement programs for all children traditionally falls on the shoulders of community tax payers. Local school boards will find themselves “caught in the middle.”

Final Comment

As in past years my purpose in writing the final issue of the commentary series is to identify and briefly discuss selected issues having a potential to watch as next year’s school year unfolds. I hope that the information contained in the paragraphs above will prove helpful to local school boards and administrators as plans are made for next year.

Have a great summer.

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Note: The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author.