

Transcript of Act 47 Q and A Session with Amy Lena, PDE and PA Principals' Staff, Eric Eshbach, Beth Haldeman, and Vangie Unti

Eric: Hello, everyone. I'm Eric Eshbach. I'm the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Principals Association. We have an important webinar for you today. I'd like to introduce some people that are on the screen with me. First of all, from the Pennsylvania Principals Association, we have Beth Haldeman, who is our Director of Professional Development, and we have Vangie Unti, who is our Human Resources Director. And we are taking the time to ask some questions of our special guest today, Amy Lena. And Amy is the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education with the Pennsylvania Department of Education. But maybe most important to you and to me is her background. She was one of us. She was a principal, and keeps that in mind as she works in the Department of Education. We have found that to be true. And Amy, we're so happy to have you with us this morning today.

Amy Lena: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited. And as Eric shared, I have been a principal. I was a teacher for many years. I was a curriculum director. I've been many different roles. And what I know is when you're in the seat that you're in, you have a lot on your plate. And what my job is, is to make it easier and is to provide you the answers that you need to do your job well. And also more importantly is to know that you have a resource at PDE. Because I do believe that although I'm going to share a lot of answers today, it's going to be a lot of information, but you'll at least have some nuggets that you can take away and say, "oh, I now know who to contact if I need some additional help". So feel free to sit back, listen, but know that we're here to help you. So thank you, Eric, for having me.

Eric: Absolutely. So we're going to the questions that we're going to ask today are all about Act 47 of 2025. It's the act that went into place with the passage of the budget back in November. And we're just going to launch right into them. So Amy, let's start with a simple yet important clarification in Act 47. So probably apply to our secondary principals more so than our elementary principals. But it says "if a public or non-public school collects a fee for admission to a school sponsored activity, cash must be accepted as a form of payment for admission". I'm sure this is in response to some districts going the way of cashless transactions, but is there any guidance you want to convey to principals about how they should communicate this and best practice for ensuring this provision is met?

Amy Lena: This is something that schools themselves are responsible for enforcing and actually doesn't fall back on the Department of Ed. But this law also doesn't prohibit schools from accepting other forms of payment. So if you have gone cashless, you can certainly continue to use those other methods. I've seen Venmo, I have seen credit card, you know, advanced payments, but school leaders really should have these conversations with their solicitors. And additionally, if you are hosting any PIAA activities, PIAA is also now required

to accept cash. But it's important to note that it's all school sponsored activities. I think sometimes even I equate it right to sports, but it applies to not just athletics and applies across the board to the public, private and non-public schools. So as you're looking at guidance, just figure out a way how can we offer that cash option for people that really prefer that method?

Eric: Yeah, so musicals, concerts, anything like that. Great. Good. Well, I'm going to ask Vangie to ask some questions specific to the human resources and certification areas. Vangie?

Vangie: All right. Good morning. So one of the most significant pieces we see are the changes coming to the certificate grade spans and age levels. Most notably, primary is going to switch back to pre-K through 6. Secondary, grade 7 through 12, our specialized areas switching to PK through grade 12. And this will immediately allow folks holding a PK to 4 certificate to teach grades 5 and 6, and immediately allowing our 7 to 12 secondary certificate holders to teach 6th grade. So if you could talk with us a little bit about what those changes are going to look like in terms of folks adding on if they wish to, and what kind of communication people may expect from PDE in terms of what those pathways may look like.

Amy Lena: Sure. And I know there was a section in the law about reference section 1202.1 Act back in 2020, the General Assembly made changes to special education grade spans, moving them back to K through 12, and allowing early childhood educators to add grades 5 and 6 through the state. That notification kind of sunsetted, but know that PDE has always believed in clear and consistent communication, and that won't change. We're going to continue to communicate with the field through our multiple channels as these updates roll out. We've added a lot of more social media updates. We found that's a great way to get the word out. So it's not just through our Ed letters, our communications, our normal emails, but also we'll be getting it out through social media. But what Act 47 doesn't here create a new notification requirement to simply sunset the older provisions as of July 1st, 2028. So this is really a technical cleanup to make sure the statute aligns with the broader certification changes under Act 47. And so along those lines, the short answer to most of your questions is there will be new certificates issued after June 1st, 2027. But there's important transition story behind it. Under Act 47, PDE technically has the authority to award certificates aligned to the new grade spans. That said, we can't actually issue those new certificates until the pathways exist. And those pathways including things like new assessments to add grade spans, continuing education routes, and updated educator preparation programs. But if you've been in education long enough, you may remember the last major certification shift about 15 years ago. This is a similar process. For a period of time, both the old and the new certificates will coexist. Preparation programs will teach students under current programs while also standing up the new ones. PDE is actively working on guidance that will lay out timelines and transition details. We know this is complex. It's happening alongside several other Act 47 certification changes which we're going to touch upon right now. We're just asking for patience, the new certification and new certificates that are coming out. Vangie, you mentioned about the fourth grade. This is one

of the most exciting things I've seen in the last five years or six years that I've been there. I am so excited. This is going to give elementary principals some more flexibility. The change allows the pre-K to 4 certificate holders to now to pay to teach grades 5 and 6 without additional testing. It gives principals more staffing flexibility. It's also a good reminder that when we move teachers across grade levels, intentional professional development especially if you're thinking about moving a primary to an upper elementary classroom. We also mentioned about the seven through 12.

The school has a need in sixth grade and a teacher holds a seven through 12 English certificate. It's helpful to remember what's changed and what hasn't. Teachers with a seven through 12 certificate have long been permitted to be sixth grade when that grade is housed in the middle school setting. What Act 47 does though is extend the flexibility seen who may now also teach sixth grade if it's located in an intermediate building like a 5-6 or an elementary school. And then you mentioned what about those new certificates? For current teachers, the answer is no. You don't need to reapply for a new certificate just because the law changed. Existing certificates remain valid. We already have that mix of certificate types in the field. For instance, some educators hold K to 6 certificates and others hold mid-level certificates like 6 to 9. I am one of them. I have many certificates so they are one of them. When certificates shifted to pre-K to 4 or 4 to 8, educators like myself were not required to reapply. This works the same way. So new certificates aligned to the updated grade spans will apply to certificates issued after July 1st, 2028. For educators who want to expand or add to their certification in the future, that would be done through a new pathway that PDE is still in the process of standing up.

And your last point, I believe, I want to make sure I hit all of them, is those wishing to expand. And will there be costs to add on testing, professional development or a new PDE certificate? And we're really thinking about those that have that middle level, maybe the 4 to 8, or someone like me, a 6 to 9. At this point, the specific details around costs haven't been finalized. Historically, when educators choose to add a certification, there have been costs associated with assessment, coursework, or continuing ed. And that's likely to be similar here. PDE is actively working on guidance that will outline what those pathways look like, including assessments and professional learning opportunities. That guidance will address timing and expectations, so educators and LEAs can plan accordingly.

Did I get all of them?

Vangie: Yes, thank you, Amy.

Eric: So let's move away from certification. Another significant piece that I noticed in this is related to cyber charter funding. Talk to us about what that means for a public school and how it could help their budget.

Amy Lena: Yeah, one of the significant changes related to cyber charter funding affects the district public school budget, while the cyber charter public schools are going to be ultimately the recipients of this funding. From a district perspective, what's helpful here is the updated PDE 363 form, which is now available. While there is no, I think there's been some confusions. Is there a due date to complete the new form? The new form is technically

by law, not due til next November. But school leaders need to remember that if you do not complete the form, then we have to use whatever amount has already been submitted if there is a dispute. So you want to get the new form in as soon as possible. Because it now allows districts to include additional allowable deductions when calculating payments. That creates a more accurate reflection of district costs and could potentially provide relief.

Eric: So related to that, we do have some members who are cyber charter school principals. And I see there is a new requirement for them that at least once during each instructional week, the school must visibly see and communicate in real time with each of its students. How's that to be documented by the school? And are there other requirements associated with that? Any enforcement consequences for noncompliant schools? Exceptions for students traveling or ill or anything like that?

Amy Lena: Yeah, there is a new attendance-related requirement for cyber charter schools. And it's really about clarity, accountability, and student well-being. It became effective January 11, 2026. And all charter schools, including the cyber charters, must clearly explain in their attendance policies how they determine when a student is present, excused absent, or unexcused absent. But for the cyber charter school, Act 47 requires two specific components. First, schools must explain how attendance is determined for synchronous instruction. To be considered present now, in a synchronous instructional period, a student must be present and visible to the teacher on camera for each course. Second, schools must define attendance for asynchronous instruction. In that setting, attendance is tied to completion of weekly benchmarks that are sufficient to show the student is making the adequate and consistent progress. If those benchmarks aren't completed, the school attendance policy must explain whether it results in an absence or another consequence. I do want to mention that the law states that benchmarks have to be approved by PDE June 30th for the following year. Since this law was passed, way past June 30th, we will not be collecting benchmarks until June 30th, 2026 for the 26-27 school year. Right now, that does give us time, which we are doing, working with the cyber charters to get them in a place where we can get the benchmarks. That does give us a little space to work with them. That's what's happening right now behind the scenes, and we will have the benchmark piece up and running for next year.

Act 47 also allows PDE to require proof of compliance to ensure students' well-being and to verify attendance. That proof can take a variety of forms, including but not limited to electronic records showing student and staff login times or participation data. And just like any school setting, there will be times when students are sick or have legitimate reasons for missing instruction. That's why Act 47 also requires cyber charters to clearly define an excused in the unexcused absence or determined for synchronous and asynchronous. PDE is currently working directly with cyber charter schools to support implementation and ensure compliance, including providing guidance and clarifying expectations as schools update their attendance policies. In addition, PDE has a attendance toolkit that is already available to all schools. The toolkit includes information and resources to support professionals working with students and families to improve attendance, and PDE will be working with the Department of Human Services, or DHS, to update and strengthen it over

time. In the meantime, I stress to all principals to really check that out because it's a valuable resource schools could be using right now.

Eric, you mentioned what if they don't comply? Well, Act 47 does give PDE additional oversight tools. Those can include requiring more detailed reporting on student wellness checks, mandating additional child abuse recognition, and reporting training for staff. We can require in-person meetings with students at least once a year, or prohibit the school from receiving certain PDE-awarded state grants. There has been some additional oversight there. The overall goal, though, here isn't to be punitive. It's to make expectations transparent, ensure consistent attendance policies, and really the most important thing to me, support the well-being of students in a cyber environment.

Eric: And we've talked about this applying to cyber charter schools, but I assume this applies to any program that has online learning. Is that correct?

Amy Lena: I'm actually really glad you followed up with that question, because I have received it. And so the law, because PDE has, we are really there to follow the lines of the law, the letters of the law, I should say, that cyber programs, which are the cyber schools within a school district, are not required right now to do the exact same. They are following the school district's attendance policies, and the new law, Act 47, really only applies to the 14 PDE-approved cyber schools. So thank you for asking that.

Eric: But thanks for clarifying, because I've gotten that question from some of our principals.

So Section 1333 prohibits a habitually truant child from transferring to a cyber charter school unless a judge determines the transfer is in the best interest of the child. How is that going to be monitored? How do you anticipate that will look?

Amy Lena: Yeah, so this is an area where coordination is going to really matter. Section 133 now makes clear that as of December 12, 2025, a child who is a habitually truant may not transfer during the school year to a cyber charter school unless a judge determines that the transfer is in the best interest of the child. Because this change was adopted and implemented mid-year, it's realistic to expect there's going to be some bumps along the road as we figure out for brick and mortar schools and cyber charter schools to work together, to apply consistently. That same restriction, though, I did want to note, also applies when a student seeks to transfer from one cyber charter school to another cyber charter school.

So in guidance sent to the field, PDE has asked cyber charter schools to proactively reach out to a student's prior school to determine whether the student has been identified as a habitually truant. That coordination is going to be essential. I think it's also important to read our enrollment basic education circular, because it does say that enrollment can happen normally between one and five days upon the completion. So I do see that there's been some confusion that it has to happen immediately, but we want to make sure we have all the pieces for the puzzle, including the truancy piece.

Act 47 also strengthens the front end of the truancy process. When a child reaches a third unexcused absence, this is really important for principals. All schools must notify the parent or guardian within 10 school days. But this is what's really important. That notice must explain the consequences of the truant child and now must specifically inform families that a habitually truant child may not transfer to a cyber charter school unless a judge approves the transfer. The notice must also include resources, support, return to regular attendance, and may offer a school attendance improvement conference. This is super important that this is being added to a three-day notice so that parents are well aware before you get to six days. Another thing that I mentioned is parents are not deep in the same words that we use. They're not going to be using "habitually truant". So please try to remember to say, has your child had three unexcused absences? They're not going to know truant. And are they six or more days unexcused absence? And what does that mean? Explaining that to a parent rather than using truant and habitually truant will really go a long way in helping those parents understand why something may or may not happen.

Because the intent here isn't to block student movement, it's to ensure truancy concerns are addressed early and collaboratively rather than being sidestepped through the transfer. Ongoing communication and flexibility across schools will be critical as everyone adjusted to this change that took effect mid-year.

Eric: I appreciate your thoughts on that and ultimately trying to make sure that the health and well-being of the child is protected as well. I also see that there's another requirement for parents to provide a proof of residency twice a year. What do you think that's going to look like for the cyber charter schools and how will that be monitored?

Amy Lena: Yeah, quite a few changes affecting cyber charters in Act 47. And this residency requirement is one of the more significant operational ones. Going forward, parents or guardians will be required to use a form developed by PDE to provide proof of residency, not only to the cyber charter school but also to the student's resident school district. For students who are already enrolled in a cyber charter school, the first required confirmation of residency will be March 1st, 2026. It's also important to remember that students who are identified as experiencing homelessness are exempt from this requirement. In terms of monitoring and implementation, PDE is reviewing this closely and will be releasing additional guidance. The guidance will include a lengthy residency form and will outline the new residency dispute process. Cyber charter principals will play a critical role here, ensuring families are informed of this requirement, helping schools integrate the form into enrollment and re-verification processes, and coordinating with resident school districts when questions arise. The goal is consistency and clarity across the system and PDE will continue to support cyber charter leaders as these changes roll out.

Eric: Great. A lot of information in there and I really encourage our cyber charter school leaders to really review all this information and make sure they're on top of it. Thanks, Amy.

Amy Lena: We want to mention one thing. We are going to have a cyber charter leader-specific meeting because they do, there's a lot to it. So everyone received, we sent it out to the chief administrators of the cybers and I encourage everyone to join us as a cyber leader.

Beth: All right. I guess I'm up. So we're going to talk just briefly about safety and security. I see that there's some sections in there related to that. Can you explain some of the changes related to safety and security, which are immediate for LEAs to be aware of?

Amy Lena: Yeah. On the safety and security training, the key for school leaders to know is that these requirements fall under the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, or PCCD, rather than PDE. That shift would change a couple years ago. So because this is PCCD-led area, schools should be looking to PCCD for specific guidance on acceptable training, documentation, and compliance expectations. PDE will continue to coordinate where appropriate, but PCCD is the lead agency for implementation. And we'll continue to work with them to offer the Act 45 hours where applicable.

Beth: All right. Good to know. So the last section, I believe, is related to to curriculum, and it's called phase two, which I can't believe next week is February already coming up, but it goes into effect February to August of 2026. And the biggest one that jumps out to me is related to curriculum.

Let's start with section 1503, which is "school duties related to evidence-based reading". It says that LEAs must report to PDE the reading instruction curriculum they're using during this current school year. Can you elaborate on what that means, what that looks like?

Amy Lena: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. I'm really glad that you asked about this because I really want to highlight, we do need 100% participation because to support that requirement, PDE will be sending a survey to school leaders by the beginning of March. The purpose of this survey is to simply understand what curricula and resources are in use across the state. That information will help PDE identify patterns and determine what types of guidance, professional learning, or resources may be most helpful as schools move forward with evidence-based reading implementation. At this stage, this is about information gathering, not evaluation or compliance. And please know that I truly mean that. And school leaders should expect clear instructions when the survey is released.

Beth: All right. Good to know.

Eric: Can I just jump in real quick there? Amy, when you say that the survey is going to go out to all school leaders, am I to assume that that's going to go to the chief school administrator?

Amy Lena: It well.

Eric: Okay. So our principals won't necessarily be getting that information. It'll be coming down from their central office.

Amy: And their central office probably most likely will be reaching out saying, can you help us figure this out as a leadership team?

Beth: Excellent. And then also in this phase, attendance seems to be a big focus. I know we've already talked about that. But many of our principals are appointed as a school attendance officers. What does this phase two mean for those who are attendance officers?

Amy Lena: And I'm going to speak from an elementary principal who didn't have an assistant and had to do all of this myself. I would definitely listen to this because this is important. And I know I mentioned it earlier, but attendance continues to be a major focus in this phase of law. And for principals serving as that school attendance officer, this is really about reinforcing expectations that already exist. As a reminder, and this applies to all schools, when a student reaches the third unexcused absence, I know I mentioned this, but I'm going to mention it again. The school needs to notify the parent or guardian within 10 school days. And that notice now must, this is different, explain the consequences of habitual truancy and now must inform families that habitual truant child may not transfer to a cyber charter unless a judge approves the transfer. It must also include resources, support a return to regular attendance and may offer a school attendance improvement conference.

Please look at your notices and see if it has all of those pieces because it may not, but it needs to now. And that's going to help you in the future. And if unfortunately it becomes habitually truant, because Act 47 really emphasizes early communication, consistent documentation, and timely intervention. For principals, that means making sure school level systems are in place so attendance is monitored accurately and notices go out on time. PDE is supporting this work through direct guidance through our school attendance toolkit, which I mentioned, and it's now available as a practical resource schools can use immediately. Working with DHS, PDE will be adding additional resources to the toolkit in the coming months. All of this support is designed with a clear purpose in mind. The goal isn't to add paperwork, but to strengthen support before attendance issues become entrenched and to reinforce collaboration with counselors, social workers, and attendance teams as needed.

Beth: All right, great. Thank you. Thank you for that elaboration. So there is a phase three, that's the 26-27, and we encourage school leaders to take a look at that because it mandates that each student fills out a FAFSA form or opt out. But let's move on to the 27-28 school year. And I know that seems a long way out there, but it has to do with curriculum, which means budget implications for districts as they look at curriculum and textbooks and personnel and training. So Section 1503-N again mandates that LEAs must adopt an evidence-based reading curriculum, a comprehensive program of literacy, it references structured literacy. It's a lot to consider when we talk about the curriculum piece. Let's just talk about what that means for districts as far as the curriculum that they are choosing to use.

Amy Lena: Yeah, so let me talk about the FAFSA first, because that's going to affect those high school principals, and I want to make sure that they're knowing what to expect and so forth. So the FAFSA completion or opt out requirement does begin in 2026-2027, like you mentioned, which means today's juniors will be the first class impacted. Because of that, PDE recognizes that districts are going to need time to plan, given the real implications for staffing, counselor capacity, student support, communication with families, and professional development. To support the planning, PDE is partnering with PHEAA to work the next steps in implementation details and will be sharing additional guidance, tools, and

resources with schools very soon to help leaders prepare for a successful implementation next school year. I will be sending out an email shortly to chief school administrators who can then pass this on to their high school principals and counselors to ensure that they are aware of those resources. But I also wanted to take the opportunity because in the near term, PHEAA has announced a FAFSA completion workshop on February 6th of this year, and more information will be sent to chief school administrators this week and counselors to help spread the word. I also want to point out a celebration. I think it's important that we celebrate our school leaders when we can. I did receive word that this past school year was the highest participation in FAFSA ever. So without the law, I wanted to give you kudos because, well done, in making sure kids had that completed because there is money that hasn't been used for so many years. So you deserve a pat on your back because you did it without the law. Well done.

Amy Lena: All right. Let's move on to 1503. There's a lot here because you're right. This includes several significant requirements and it can feel like a lot. So starting with curriculum, the law requires LEAs to adopt an evidence-based reading curriculum defined as a comprehensive literacy program that integrates structured literacy practices with high quality instructional materials. What's important to emphasize is what does this not mean.

This is not saying that every LEA must purchase a specific textbook or copy from a approved company. The law does not limit LEAs to a particular list. The resources posted on the website are intended to be just that, a resource, to help schools evaluate materials or explore options but not a mandate. For LEAs that have already begun this work through comprehensive planning or in response to the structured literacy requirement, that effort absolutely counts. Many LEAs find that their current curriculum already aligns with the expectations in section 1503-N or only needs targeted adjustments rather than a full overhaul.

And for LEAs that have developed their own curriculum, that remains a viable path. Locally developed curriculum is permissible as long as it meets the statutory requirement integrating structured literacy practices using high quality instructional materials and aligning to evidence-based reading instruction.

The intent here is not to reset the work LEAs have already done, but to ensure that all students have access to strong research-based reading instruction while preserving local flexibility and help districts get there. To support that work, PDE will be sharing a timeline for implementation along with additional guidance and resources so LEAs can move through the process one step at a time. If you're like me, I like a checklist. If I do this, is this when it's due? That's what you're going to be getting.

One important next step for LEAs is completing the evidence-based reading survey that I already mentioned that will be released by the beginning of March. That information will help you better understand where LEAs are in the process and target support and resources to LEAs that need it the most.

Beth: Thank you, Amy. I think it is important to know exactly what you said. That does not mean that districts have to go out and immediately purchase a textbook and that what

they've already started may work but it has to be compared to the standards that are out there. I think that's really important for districts to hear loud and clear, especially curriculum leaders.

Amy Lena: I think it's important to hear. I agree with you that 27-28 is going to be here in a blink of an eye but I also appreciate that it's not next school year. We have a little bit of time, not saying for you to wait. I'm saying just take a breath and let's do this together.

Beth: Excellent. And then, it also talks about a reading intervention plan. What will that look like for students who qualify for reading services?

Amy Lena: A reading intervention plan will not be the same as an IEP and that distinction is important. This requirement is intended to support students who have a reading deficiency regardless of whether they are eligible for special education. A reading intervention plan is meant to be targeted instructional plan that outlines the support a student will receive to address specific reading needs. It's focused on instruction and progress monitoring, not on eligibility determinations or special education services. At this point, the law does not require districts to use a single standardized format. LEAs will have their local flexibility in how they design and document reading intervention plans as long as the plans align with the statutory requirements, which does include that parent notification, which I think is always a good reminder that parents are our partners and bring them into the conversation. PDE will be providing additional guidance and examples to help districts think through what these plans could look like in practice. The goal is to really ensure that students who are identified as needing additional reading support receive timely intentional intervention and that those supports are clearly documented.

Eric: Well, Amy, Act 47 brought a lot on our plates, a lot on PDE's plate, so we really appreciate you taking the time to go through a lot of those changes. Is there anything else you want principals, directors, supervisors to be aware of?

Amy Lena: Yeah, first I want to thank you for the opportunity part of this conversation because I know this is a lot of information and I want to acknowledge the work school leaders are already doing to support students while navigating these changes. My biggest takeaway for school leaders is this: you don't have to do everything at once. Many districts are already well on their way and for others there is time and support built into the process. PDE will continue to share guidance, timelines and resources and we're committed to working alongside the field as this rolls out. I also encourage leaders to stay connected, lean on your professional networks like the Principals Association, work closely with your solicitors and intermediate units and do not hesitate to reach out to PDE when questions come up or when you need support. We are here to help and again thank you for the chance to join you and for everything you do every day on behalf of Pennsylvania students and educators.

Eric: Yeah and I would just reiterate that if there's questions that we at the Principals Association can answer we have our own cadre of experts, Beth and Vangie being two of them, but we also have great connections with the Department of Education and the excellent team that they have there, so please don't hesitate to reach out. Thanks again Amy,

thanks for all the work that you do and we look forward to implementing everything that's been directed in Act 47 and look forward to a great end of the school year.

Amy Lena: Thank you.

Beth: Great, thank you.

Vangie: Thank you Amy.