



New Jersey School Boards Association

**Testimony on Senate Bill 2127 (Codey, Turner)
Senate Education Committee
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**Michael A. Vrancik
Director of Governmental Relations**

The New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of the state's local boards of education, welcomes the opportunity to discuss two separate—and related—issues: First, the need to ensure the validity of school employees' advanced degrees; and second, tuition reimbursement and increased compensation for advanced academic study.

Senate Bill 2127 reflects sound practices now in effect in almost all New Jersey school districts, as well as procedures and safeguards recommended by the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Frankly, NJSBA is alarmed that even a small number of educators would use degrees from non-accredited institutions to earn additional salary and receive tuition reimbursement. The public outrage over such practices is warranted, as is a legislative response, such as S-2127.

These instances of abuse, as disturbing as they may be, are not the norm. They do not reflect the behavior of the majority of school employees. Moreover, a majority of school districts have in place appropriate controls—either through collective bargaining agreements, individual employment contracts, or policy. These controls recognize only those degrees granted by accredited institutions; they set minimum grade standards for tuition assistance; and they place reasonable caps on reimbursement. Such safeguards are reflected in the NJSBA-developed model policies that our Association provides to all schools districts. Senate Bill 2127 also reflects these procedures.

Academic Integrity Assuring the validity of advanced degrees is essential not only for academic integrity, but also for protecting public funds. Every school district teacher salary guide, which is part of the negotiated contract, provides incremental pay increases to staff members who hold graduate degrees—whether those degrees are required for state certification, or not. Similar provisions are generally found in collective bargaining agreements with administrators. Thus, school boards recognize and support efforts, which protect the public interest by ensuring that graduate degrees received by staff come from accredited institutions.

NJSBA recommends that local school boards establish a process for checking the validity of degrees and that they designate a staff member to perform the function. In addition, NJSBA's new model

superintendent contract will call for submission of all academic credentials to the school board—whether the degree is required for state administrators’ certification, or not.

Standards for Reimbursement Almost every collective bargaining agreement between a local school board and teachers union contains a tuition reimbursement provision. Just as educators set standards of achievement for students, school employees should attain certain standards to earn the benefit of tuition assistance. NJSBA strongly advises school boards to negotiate contract provisions that require employees to receive a grade of “B” or higher in an approved course to qualify for tuition reimbursement. Such minimum grade standards are normally part of the tuition reimbursement agreements found in local school district contracts. S-2127 would place these standards in law.

Return Service A growing trend among local school district tuition assistance programs has been the inclusion of “return service agreements,” which require an employee to remain in the district for a certain period of time after receiving reimbursement. If not, the staff member would have to give the money back. Such practices represent sound public policy that ensures a return on the investment of public dollars.

S-2127 would require return service agreements as part of tuition reimbursement plans. However, from the local school boards’ perspective, the bill provides less of a safeguard than do the current practices of many districts. The bill would require employees to remain in the district for one year in order to retain the tuition assistance payment. In fact, a number of local school district contracts go further by requiring continued employment for two years or more after the tuition assistance is awarded.

Therefore, NJSBA recommends an amendment to paragraph 1(e), stating that the employee must remain in the district for a *minimum* of one year in order to retain tuition reimbursement. Such a change would enable school boards to continue negotiating the type of return service arrangements that, they believe, are in the best interests of the education program.

Relation to Coursework S-2127 also reflects prevailing practices that permit tuition assistance only for coursework related to an employee’s responsibilities. However, by allowing reimbursement for classes related both to current *and future* responsibilities, the bill is more generous than existing practice in many areas. A number of school districts, in fact, restrict reimbursement to courses related only to the staff member’s *current* position. These school boards believe that it is not in the community’s best interest to pay for training that an employee would not use while working in the district. Other boards, however, might find that investing in training which, for example, would enable a teacher to assume a future supervisory or administrative role does fit in with the district’s educational goals.

NJSBA, therefore, recommends an amendment to paragraph 1(f) that would give school districts the discretion either to limit tuition assistance only to those courses related to current job responsibilities **or** to restrict reimbursement to classes related to current and future responsibilities. Such an amendment would better connect tuition assistance to the educational goals of the district, as well as to those of the employee.

Capping Reimbursement NJSBA strongly advises local school boards to cap tuition reimbursement at a specific dollar amount. In paragraph 1(d), the proposed legislation would establish a tuition-assistance limit. But rather than setting it at a dollar amount, the bill would link it to the current average cost per credit at Rutgers, the State University. NJSBA does not recommend that school boards tie reimbursement limits to the tuition costs of a particular institution of higher education—for the basic reason that local school districts have no control over tuition rates at Rutgers or any other college or university.

While we are not offering an amendment to this section at this time, I want to point out that any tuition increases at Rutgers could, in turn, increase the cost of tuition assistance for local school districts.

Impact on Future Contracts After reviewing the legislation and speaking with Senate Committee staff, NJSBA believes that S-2127's provisions will impact all individual employment contracts and collective bargaining agreements that are finalized after the bill's effective date. We support that goal and, therefore, are offering a proposed amendment to Paragraph 2 that would help to clarify the sponsors' intention.

The New Jersey School Boards Association serves as an advocate for local boards of education and an information and training resource for individual board members. Our mission is to promote sound governance of local school districts. We believe that the concepts contained in S-2127 would assist local school boards by setting appropriate standards for tuition reimbursement.

NJSBA also stands ready to work with the state Department of Education, the regulatory authority over public education in New Jersey, in carrying out standards that ensure the validity of the academic degrees awarded to school district employees.

The New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of district boards of education, advocates the interests of school districts, trains local school board members, and provides resources for the advancement of public education.