

Communication Across Education Levels: Pre-K to 16 Council in Action

Because the education landscape is constantly changing, there is a clear need for open forums for educators, future educators, and administrators to discuss policies and procedures and to ensure their proper implementation. The Berks County Pre-K to 16 Council, composed of representatives from the Berks County Intermediate Unit, school districts, colleges, and universities in Berks County, provides opportunities for discussion and collaboration among education professionals.

The Berks County Pre-K to 16 Council is an offshoot of the ACTS in PA (Aligning Curriculum to Standards in Pennsylvania: A K–16 Teacher Quality Enhancement Initiative) grant that began in 2004, creating four Pre-K to 16 councils in Pennsylvania.

The goal of ACTS in PA was to improve student achievement through improved classroom instruction. The Pre-K to 16 Council worked to improve classroom instruction through enhanced pre-service, formation of professional development schools, and improved in-service. The original ACTS in PA grant included the Reading School District, Alvernia University, and Albright College. Berks County Intermediate Unit staff served on the Allentown/Bethlehem/Reading K–16 Council.

When the grant expired, staff members of BCIU's Office of Professional Development and Curriculum were determined to continue the work of the Pre-K to



From left to right: Beth Kozloski, Dr. Stella Leonti, Theresa Schutt, and Cheri Woyurka discuss Pre-K to 16 Council initiatives after a recent quarterly meeting.

16 Council by concentrating their efforts on all the school districts, colleges, and universities within our county.

Currently, meetings are held quarterly to provide members regular opportunities to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern and to determine action plans for practical collaborative activities. **Dr. Dennis Roule**, assistant superintendent at Conrad Weiser Area School District, feels that the council provides a helpful window into the varied concerns that exist throughout the multiple levels of education. "The resources and constraints that determine decision-making at the early childhood and collegiate level are not always apparent to those of us who work in basic education. Just the understanding that the 'rules' are not the same and the goals are not always congruent makes dialog easier and more productive," said Roule.

Dr. David Bender, coordinator of the Penn State Berks Elementary Education Program, attends meetings regularly. “The Pre-K to 16 Council has provided a valuable forum for college faculty in the teacher education programs among Berks County colleges and school district administrators to share common challenges and develop creative solutions with respect to improving the preparation of new teachers in the county,” said Bender. “BCIU has improved communication and collaboration by bringing together the varied stakeholders, all of whom have the goal of enhancing student learning.”

Cathy Kreitz, director of clinical experience and outreach at Kutztown University, finds the council and BCIU’s role as facilitator to be a valuable resource for local educators. “Discussions, pertinent to current educational changes affecting districts as well as universities, are informal and, at the same time, informative,” said Kreitz. “BCIU plays an integral part facilitating council meetings, bringing key people together, and keeping lines of communication open among those responsible for the education of our most important commodity—our youth.”

Dr. Stella Leonti, field office director for student teacher placement at Alvernia University, has had the unique experience of being a member of the Pre-K to 16 Council as both a school district central office administrator and a university representative working with students preparing to enter the teaching profession. “The council provides a format in which school districts and teacher education institutions can dialog on common challenges and together tackle barriers and obstacles. It serves as a strong communication line for the school districts and teacher institutions of Berks County,” says Leonti.

All the members of the Pre-K to 16 Council would like to see an increase in co-teaching sessions with curriculum coordinators from districts and university professors. The goal is to help university students have a better view of and transition to the realities of the public school environment.

Future topics for discussion will include the impact on all levels of teaching in Pennsylvania in the wake of the Department of Education certification changes, such as the subdivision of the traditional K–8 certification into Pre-K to grade 4 and grades 4–8. These changes will significantly impact students who are

pursuing early childhood and elementary certification and who will be required to have pre-service and student teaching experiences.

Wendy Steensland, assistant director of the Office of Early Childhood and Student Services, is preparing BCIU staff members to work as cooperating teachers for these students. As one of the newest members of the council, she has quickly come to value the rich conversation of the group. “One of the benefits of the council is the establishment of professional relationships. It has been very helpful to me to have someone in the district or in higher education to turn to when I have questions,” said Steensland.

All school district and university administrators are welcome to attend the Pre-K to 16 quarterly meetings. For more information and dates of future meetings, please contact **Dr. Bonnie Troxell**, director of BCIU’s Office of Professional Development and Curriculum, at 610-987-8241 or bontro@berksiu.org.

Through its collaborative efforts, the Pre-K to 16 Council has been able to bring a wealth of opportunities to Berks County educators and students. The following items are among the past and ongoing projects for which the council is responsible:

- Kutztown University students serve as after-school tutors at Tilden Elementary in the Hamburg Area School District.
- Each semester, Oley Valley School District hosts an entire Kutztown University class of students working to complete their professional semester hour requirements.
- BCIU Human Resources Director **Karen Gokay** conducts workshops at Alvernia University to familiarize students with PDE certification requirements.
- BCIU compiled a list of contacts and surveyed all stakeholders to streamline communication and procedures for district administrators and higher education field offices to place student teachers.
- Council members improved “transition to kindergarten” procedures that occur each year.