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Published in Wyalusing, PA - On Line Since 1997 - In Print Since 1887

2017-08-31 / Front Page

PA Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera Visits Wyalusing

— BY AMY GIRVEN —



Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera made a surprise visit to Wyalusing on Thursday, Aug. 24, when he addressed teachers and administrators at the close of their in-service day. Before heading back to Harrisburg, Rivera posed with Wyalusing Area School District administrators for a photo in front of the high school. Those pictured include (left to right) WVHS Assistant Principal Donald Jacopetti, Director of Special Education Leslie Harrington, Business Manager Stephanie Heller; Pedro Rivera; District Superintendent Dr. Jason Bottiglieri; WVES Principal Deneen Lantz; WVHS Principal Gary Otis and Curriculum and Technology Director Dr. Deana Patson. Photo by Amy Girven

Ed.”

This was Pedro Rivera’s first visit to Bradford County since taking over as PA Secretary of Education two years ago. One of the purposes of his visit to Bradford County was to get feedback on public school education from those at the center of it.

Rivera was nominated by Gov. Tom Wolf to serve as the Secretary of Education on Jan. 20, 2015, and was confirmed by the state Senate in June 2015.

He joined the Wolf Administration after having served as Superintendent of the Lancaster PA School District, a position he held from 2008-2015.

In September 2014, Rivera was honored by the White House as a Champion of Change for his efforts to transform urban education—one of 10 recipients nationwide to receive the prestigious honor.

There was a lot of buzz in the Wyalusing Valley High School (WVHS) auditorium last Thursday afternoon, Aug. 24, as teachers, administrators and board members anxiously awaited the arrival of the “special guest” whom they had been promised would pay a visit.

District Superintendent Dr. Jason Bottiglieri kept everyone in the dark about just who would be speaking at the end of their in-service day, prompting much curiosity.

During his welcome speech, Bottiglieri joked, “On the way in, throughout the day, everyone would ask: Who is it? We had Beyoncé, we had J. Lo,” Bottiglieri said. “We beat all of them, we have the Secretary of



Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera, left, with Wyalusing Area School District Superintendent Dr. Jason Bottiglieri out in front of the Wyalusing Valley High School before heading back to Harrisburg. Bottiglieri surprised teachers, administrators and board members at the close of the in-service day with Rivera’s visit following a tour of the county. Photo by Amy Girven

“We really wanted to get out to school districts and take a moment and celebrate the amazing things that are happening,” Rivera told the Wyalusing audience, “both in the schools across our commonwealth and the PDE (Pennsylvania Department of Education).”

Rivera noted his excitement at getting to walk into a school in the days leading up to a new school year, saying that it’s always an exciting time to walk in “to your school and seeing shining floors, organized classrooms and white boards or chalkboards that are just ready to be written on.”

During his tour of the county, Rivera made stops in the Canton and Troy school districts, among others, before stopping at Wyalusing on his way back to Harrisburg.

Rivera went to each location, offering information about two hot education topics: standardized testing and college and career readiness.

With a goal to “change the trajectory and focus of education and re-envision how Pennsylvania deals with these sectors,” Rivera shared that the Department of Education has significantly cut testing time, a difference that will be seen this school year.

State testing for fourth through eighth grades will be reduced by 20 percent while third-grade testing will see a 25 percent decline, providing two additional days of classroom instruction time.

This news brought a large round of cheers and clapping from the third-grade teachers at WVHS, allowing Rivera to pinpoint their location in the auditorium almost immediately.

By next school year, Rivera told the teachers that the PDE plans to move testing times later in the year, lending more time for teaching material prior to the state tests, rather than having teachers concerned with “teaching the test.”

Rivera also said that teachers can expect to see results returned to them in a more timely fashion so they can be used as a guide for teaching materials.

“We’re looking at assessments and we’re looking at accountability in a more meaningful way. We understand that assessments are important, but they’re important for one opportunity and that is to drive instruction,” he explained.

Rivera hopes the reduced testing percentages will be seen as a positive for the students, too. He joked with teachers and administrators, saying, ‘We’ve all heard the story of a parent whose son walks up to them with a waiver and says ‘I need you to sign this’, and the parent looks at the letter and says, ‘you want to opt out of testing, what are you opting out of’ and the son says ‘I’m really tired, the stress that’s created with this test in my school, on my teacher and on myself, I don’t really want to participate in the PSSA pep rally....’ And the parent looks at the student and says, ‘I can’t sign this, I’m the Secretary of Education, what would my colleagues think if I opted out my son from the test?’”

While bringing some levity to what is often a very tense and stressful time, in all seriousness, Rivera understands that by reducing the amount of time students are being tested, the focus can be centered on the students’ needs, not only to get them better scores on a test.

Rivera added that upon the announcement of the reduction of testing time, his son said to him, “You know, this is probably the coolest thing you’ve ever done in your career.”

Future-Ready PA

“We’re not stopping there,” Rivera said, describing how the PDE as a whole is moving away from SPP (School Performance Profile) scoring, toward the Future Ready PA model.

The SPP scores rank schools and educators almost solely on state assessment scores and to a more holistic approach to determining growth.

With Pennsylvania’s new Future Ready PA system, the reliance on state tests to develop a view of teacher and whole school performances will drop to 40 percent, less than half of the previous 90 percent, and assessors will focus more on year-to-year and benchmark growth.

“At the end of the day we want to ensure that our students are improving year to year, not just focusing on one static measurement test.”

Rivera said that the PDE also wants to focus on “on track measures”—third-grade reading level attainment, seventh-grade math level attainment— as well as introducing college and career readiness.

Regarding College and Career readiness, Rivera explained that the PDE is looking to highly promote advanced placement, dual enrollment and career and technical education programs as a way to give students a taste of college during their years of primary education.

“There is no better way to ensure a student is college and career ready than by exposing them to both the environment and the skills that they’d be engaging in college.”

In the past, programs offering career, technical and advanced placement opportunities were taken from students scoring low on state tests and replaced with extra time working on testing material.

“In that college and career ready area, we want to make sure that teachers, we want to ensure that administrators, we want to work with superintendents to engage students and to engage faculty in a way that allows them multiple pathways to success because we realize as different as all our children are, we know that their needs are equally different, but their opportunities for success have to be that diverse, have to be that engaging and provide that much in terms of interaction and enrichment,” Rivera said.

He laid it right out to the teachers, “No one in the commonwealth does what we do,” adding, “we have to remind ourselves that it is the occupation that creates all other occupations, and we are the vision that provides clarity for all other visions, and we are the mission that drives all other missions. And for that, we have reason to celebrate and feel extremely proud.”

[Return to top](#)