



# Back to School Special

*Secretary of Education*

*Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak*

*answers questions on the state  
of learning in Pennsylvania*

**D**r. Gerald L. Zahorchak has set the expectation that all of the Commonwealth's nearly 2.1 million schoolchildren should graduate ready for college and careers.

Before being confirmed Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education in 2006, Zahorchak was deputy secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education in the department. He earned his doctorate from Penn State and has served as a superintendent, principal, teacher and football coach during his career.

Zahorchak's advice to Penn State? "It should keep the ends in mind—good knowledge and skills—when preparing teachers and education leaders. Penn State is a great ally and friend to the Department of Education."

He recently spoke with Penn State Outreach magazine about the state's biggest education challenges.

**Gerald L. Zahorchak wants every student to graduate ready for college and careers.**

**Q:** *What's the most important issue you face as the Secretary of Education?*

**A:** We know that Pennsylvania's students are entering the most difficult and unforgiving economy in our history. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are prepared for the challenges ahead. I want more than anything to be able to say with confidence that every Pennsylvania student who receives a high school diploma is ready for the real world.

**Q:** *How are you responding to this challenge?*

**A:** We are investing in the future of our students, so that they are ready for college and the workforce. We are doing this in two ways: (1) investing in quality resources and supports that are reinforcing the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the high-skills global economy and (2) instituting a funding formula to fill a large gap in education funding. According to a legislative costing-out study, we need to invest \$2.6 billion more in our schools just to assure adequate educational resources for all Pennsylvania students.

**Q:** *What happens without that money?*

**A:** If schools do not have the resources that are necessary so that all students can be successful, then we are creating significant problems not only for those students, but also our economy overall. We need a productive, highly skilled workforce to remain competitive and not create a system in which too many of our students are at great risk of ending up in remediation programs in college or, in the worst cases, on welfare or in prison.

**Q:** *You're partnering with WPSU and PBS to bring interactive, digital media into classrooms. What's the importance of this initiative?*

**A:** We will be creating a nationally and internationally envied system by harnessing learning materials that have been produced in a world-class fashion. We can use this content to target what our students need. I commend Penn State and PBS. (See below box, "Going Digital in the Classroom.")

**Q:** *There are new certification requirements for teachers to create inclusive classrooms. How are teachers responding?*

**A:** In the same way we adapt and ensure by codes that buildings are universally designed and accessible, instruction in the classroom should have a universal design that everyone can use. We've mandated in a certificate an understanding of human development and universal design that will make our workforce much more responsive to any child, regardless of his or her disability.

**Q:** *U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has suggested students spend more time in school. Is this a good idea?*

**A:** We have to do it. We are already providing after-school and summer tutoring and other interventions. We need to provide professional development year-round for teachers. We can't do everything we need to do in five-hour days for 180 days a year and expect to compete with nations whose children spend more time in school.

**Q:** *Gov. Ed Rendell proposes consolidating Pennsylvania's school districts from 500 to 100 districts. What will this mean for children's education?*

**A:** We know two things: We need to buy big and get cost benefits, and we need to deliver small, using funds closer to teaching and learning of the students.

**Q:** *A National Governors Association report indicates American public education has failed to recruit a top-notch teaching workforce. What needs to change?*

**A:** The top one-third of high school graduates do not major in education. We're not attracting these graduates into the profession. We need to put the best and brightest in the classroom. Teaching is a great career. ▀

## GOING DIGITAL IN THE CLASSROOM

A new partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Education, WPSU/Penn State Public Broadcasting and PBS will provide teachers with high-quality digital media for the classroom and also serve as a national model.

Dr. Babs Bengtson, director of Educational Services for WPSU/Penn State Public Broadcasting, said the goal is "getting into classrooms with digital media—Flash animations, interactive games—and making a difference in student achievement." The first digital media, for math, will be available in January 2010.

"It's very important to us that we're offering this for free," said Bengtson. "We feel strongly that the rural population in Pennsylvania has access to this."

PBS' Educational Digital Content Asset Repository and newly created digital media will help teachers implement new state standards for math, science, social studies and literacy. WPSU and PBS also will create professional development videos for teachers.