

# Octorara Administration Office

228 HIGHLAND ROAD, SUITE 1, ATGLEN, PA 19310-1603

Phone: (610) 593-8238

Fax: (610) 593-6425



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**Thomas L. Newcome II, Ed.D.**  
Superintendent

**Nancy S. Bishop, Ed.D.**  
Asst. Superintendent

Testimony – Public Hearing on Economic Stimulus Plan  
March 9, 2009

Dr. Thomas L. Newcome II, Ed.D.

## Professional Experience

Superintendent – Octorara Area School District, July 2003 – Present

Assistant Superintendent – Octorara Area School District, July 2001 – June 2003

Principal – Octorara Middle School, September 1996 – June 2001

Assistant Principal – Southern York County School District, August 1990 – August 1996

Assistant Principal, Wake County Public Schools, Raleigh, N.C., July 1986 – July 1990

Math/Science Teacher, Wake County Public Schools, Raleigh, N.C. January 1983 – June 1986

## Education

Bachelor of Science, Math Education, North Carolina State University, 1982

Master of Education, Educational Leadership, University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, 1987

Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, Nova Southeastern University, 2003

## Testimony

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you this morning about the needs of the Octorara Area School District related to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Our school district has been well represented in the State House by Representative Bryan Cutler and Representative Art Hershey in recent years and it is encouraging to have met with Representative Tom Houghton and to witness his interest in our unique circumstances as a school district.

I understand that there is much that I do not understand about the appropriation of the money coming from the Federal Government to the State. So, I will not pretend to understand. However, I will try to express our needs and our ideas. I appreciate your interest in what I have to say. I tend to oversimplify things – and with only ten minutes to speak that may be best.

Seventy-five percent of the Octorara Area School District is located in Chester County and twenty-five percent of the Octorara Area School District is located in Lancaster County. We operate collaboratively with the Chester County Intermediate Unit. We are substantially a rural, agricultural district with four town centers in Parkesburg, Cochranville, Atglen, and Christiana. As reported in *Making Poverty History in Chester County, PA, The Challenging Road to Self-Sufficiency*, [www.chesco.org/makingpovertyhistory](http://www.chesco.org/makingpovertyhistory), the Octorara Area School District comprises the largest area of poverty in Chester County.



Our residents have the largest tax responsibility as related to ability to pay of any school district in Chester or Lancaster County. Our property assessments are the lowest in Chester County and the mil rate is the highest in Chester County. We are still responsible to meet all State mandates and we have the constant expectation to achieve in like manner with our neighboring districts within our intermediate unit.

If there are ways to utilize the stimulus funding in four specific areas outlined from this point forward, I believe the residents of the Octorara Area School District and many like districts will be well served.

First, it appears that specific allocations for school infrastructure have been eliminated from the stimulus package. However, it also appears that it will be possible to use general state stabilization funds for school infrastructure needs (e.g., modernization, renovation and repair). If it is determined to use funds in such a manner I would ask that consideration be made for more than just "shovel ready" projects. I ask that consideration be given for projects that are already under shovel and for relief of general debt service for past projects. There are many districts like the Octorara Area School District in which the residents have taken on a financial burden in order to keep facilities modern and under repair. Presently the Octorara Area School District is engaged in a \$37,000,000 project to renovate a 50+ year old high school. Our project has created jobs and will continue to do so for the next two and one-half years. If money is to be spent on "shovel ready" projects I would hope that money will be spent on projects "under shovel". The financial burden of this project will be carried by the property owner in the Octorara Area School District for the next twenty years.

Add this financial burden to the financial burden of other recent projects to modernize our school buildings and the average property owner in the Octorara Area School District pays \$800 per year for our debt service. My guess is we are not dissimilar from many districts around the Commonwealth. My simplistic idea is to use stimulus funds to pay of debt service for district across the Commonwealth. The immediate result in the Octorara Area School District would be an average \$800 tax reduction for all property owners – which residents would see in July. That is immediate stimulus. In addition, this would be a permanent reduction – so the funding going in this effort would make a continued impact for years to come.

The second point would be to put money into replacing revenues lost for rural districts by the enactment of Act 319. The Octorara Area School District lost over 170,000,000 in property valuation with the enactment of Act 319. At the time the legislators realized this would have a negative impact on school district like the Octorara Area School District. Companion legislation to reduce the effect of Act 319 on rural districts never made it out of committee. In recent years there have been several bills presented to address this. If you could find a way to replace these lost revenues the average tax bill in the Octorara Area School District would reduce by about \$500. Preserving the agricultural areas of our State is important. However, when the financial burden of doing this for all residents of the State falls on the shoulders of a few residents in the State – it does raise concerns.

My third point is that we can do better in developing private and public partnerships if the laws and the bureaucracy would be friendlier toward this goal. The Octorara Area community needs to be working together to promote economic development. We have been fortunate because Representatives Cutler and Hershey both believed in this and have been working together with our local municipal leaders and our school district. Senator Brubaker has additionally been quite active with our community efforts. However, in the absence of leadership from our School Board – there was no initiative to find common solutions for our communities. Everyone is happy with someone else to blame. Local governments blame the school district,



State officials blame schools, and everyone blames the State. The only thing we can agree on is that it is all someone else's fault. Some stimulus money should go toward community building with commensurate laws to require communities and school districts to work together – with State officials. Within this collaboration we must find ways to marry private and public enterprise.

Finally, I have listened to President Obama talk about infusing our schools with technology. I support this – only if it is done well. The Classrooms of the Future Grant is a recent example of money that was sent to schools in a manner that was pretty sound. The Octorara Area High School received 600 laptop computers for our high school along with “smart boards” for most classrooms. What made this initiative successful was that there was required, and afforded, funding for a person to be trained and to train staff in the use of the technology. The use of this technology will be successful and will expand as long as the person(s) is in place to train and service the staff. The first thing to go during budget cutting at the local level is the training and support positions. If you do anything with technology – please make sure the training and the resources for maintaining the infrastructure are in place.

I would maintain that if we are serious about the next generation in technology at the k-12 level we should be expecting to invest in a new layer of technology support personnel to oversee the revolution. There will be a need for technicians that manage the hardware and the software – possibly a tech support system that would sensibly be shared amongst districts – create our own India. There will need to be trainers that work with teachers and children to unwrap the potential learning experiences that the technology holds. Someone will need to oversee this.

The next generation of technology needs to take us away from our present paradigm. Our students are already in the post-desktop model of human-computer interaction in which information processing has been thoroughly integrated into everyday objectives and activities. The term for this is ubiquitous computing (ubicomputing). Money spent going forward should look beyond the desktop paradigm, in which a single user consciously engages a single device for a specialized purpose. Someone using ubiquitous computing engages many computational devices and systems simultaneously, in the course of ordinary activities, and may not necessarily even be aware that they are doing so. We must proceed toward this goal, but the key is training our work force. Please put a large percentage of funding into training.

Please consider the points I have briefly outlined above. The first two provide immediate tax relief and in the Octorara Area School District will provide an immediate \$1,300 stimulus to the average family income – without cutting school programs. The last two points are long term in nature and will help us maintain or improve our position as we work better and smarter together. I started by indicating that my expertise does not include an understanding of how money is appropriated from the Federal to the State level. I also indicated that I might oversimplify things. I get it that your jobs are challenging and that there are competing interests for your time and efforts. I know that as I listen to the national and state dialogue these ideas make sense to me in relationship to my responsibility to administer a local school district. Thank you for your indulgence in giving me the time to speak this morning.

*The mission of the Octorara Area School District, through a partnership among school, community and family, is to promote educational excellence in a safe, secure environment, empowering our students with the skills necessary to be successful, responsible members of society.*