

## *Saving Our Schools*

Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

(This article appeared in the August 20, 2003 edition of the *Reston Connection*, Reston, VA)

Public schools are under attack from many directions: From those who want to withhold adequate funding or who want to divert existing funding into private schools through tuition tax credits, vouchers or charter schools. From those who want to impose unreasonable accountability standards that universal public schools will never be able to meet. And from those who want to include their ideology in the curriculum.

But this onslaught has also brought out many public schools defenders. It is heartening to see the amount of activity in this election year on behalf of public schools. And that activity is going well beyond the PTAs, as important as they are.

Grassroots advocates for increased state funding of K-12 education have formed a statewide, bipartisan political action committee to help elect education- friendly candidates to the General Assembly. The RENEW Virginia Schools Political Action Committee (RVSPAC) is raising money, endorsing candidates, and running parallel campaigns on behalf of education-friendly candidates. Their website is [www.renewvaschools.org](http://www.renewvaschools.org).

RENEW grew out of a number of organizations throughout the state that felt frustrated from the unwillingness of the General Assembly to fully fund the state's share of the Standards of Quality (SOQ). By its own studies, the General Assembly underfunds public schools by a billion dollars each year. And that number is based on the current SOQs that are so low that all schools systems exceed them. The State Board of Education recently found that an additional third of a billion dollars would be necessary to bring the SOQs into line with prevailing practices.

A recently formed Alliance for Public Education brings together the many groups interested in public education K-12 and higher education. Formed as a confederation of other organizations, the Alliance intends to focus public attention on public education needs during the election year. They are asking candidates to sign a pledge supporting public education. For a copy of the pledge that I have signed, visit their website, [www.vastudents.org](http://www.vastudents.org).

A group of college students who organized themselves on the William and Mary campus and other Virginia college campuses last year on behalf of the successful higher education bond issues have expanded their scope of interest and formed a new organization with a broader agenda. The Virginia 21 or 21st Virginia Coalition defines itself as "a bipartisan organization with a nonpartisan message: we must act today in order to shape tomorrow." Their chief goal is "to build an involved community of 18-24 year olds in the Commonwealth." Their website is [www.virginia21.org](http://www.virginia21.org).

The Fairfax County Council of PTAs is once again "as an informational service to our members and others interested in K-12 public education" publishing a "legislative scorecard" examining the support of public schools by members of the General Assembly from Fairfax County. The PTAs do not endorse candidates, but incumbents receive a rating based on an examination of their voting records in committees and on the floor during the 2003 session. Ratings are "Top of the Class," "Friend of Education," "Shows Effort, Needs Work" and "Bottom of the Class." I was pleased to be informed that I am rated "Top of the Class." The website of the Fairfax County Council of PTAs is [www.fccpta.org](http://www.fccpta.org).

With the amount of activity on behalf of public schools this election year it may be possible to increase the number of legislators in the General Assembly who are interested in saving our schools.