

Testimony Submitted by Donna Cooper
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Philadelphia City Council
Committee on Education
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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Education Committee on the important issue of public school funding. I commend Committee Chairwoman Blackwell for holding this hearing.

While our focus today is how the state should fund the schools, in every state but Hawaii the responsibility for funding schools is shared between the local taxpayers and the state. I believe our local jurisdiction, the City of Philadelphia, should do more to fund our schools. Council and the Mayor have stepped up local tax efforts in the last three years boosting local revenues by nearly \$100 million on a recurring basis.

But it's obvious we need to do more. Parents are volunteering as librarians and others are stepping in to fill the shortage of counselors. Too many buildings have too few adults and as a result we are seeing troubling violent incidents on the rise. Deadlines for high school applications had to be extended; leveling couldn't happen on time. All of this is because we simply don't have enough boots on the ground and our children are suffering.

You wisely increased the local cigarette tax rate which if enacted would generate approximately \$87 million more for the District. Unfortunately, right wing politicians in Harrisburg are holding true to 'no tax pledges' to a person who doesn't even live in this state instead of living up to the constitutional obligation they take an oath to uphold which requires that the state provide for a thorough and efficient education of our children.

But state officials are not the only elected officials who are not doing all they can for our children. This body has been given the authority by the state to use one percent of sales tax revenues to fund the schools. Doing so would generate \$120 million in recurring funds for the district. While there are other pressing needs for additional revenues including public sector pension obligations, I urge Council to find other ways to fund those obligations in cooperation with the state and move forward on authorizing this 1 percent sales tax for the District. Doing this sooner rather than later will make discussion with the state about next year's school district budget much more rational and productive.

Even if you act today, as I think you should, those funds will not be available until next fiscal year. The current city budget as adopted has a positive fund balance. At the end of September, local tax collections are \$31 million above the collections for the same time last year, according to the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority. The budget you passed showed a significant fund balance of \$86 million. We are sitting on local tax revenues, paid by the citizens of this city, and our Rome is burning. There is no dispute that the economic prospects of the City will decline if the School District's condition worsens. I urge you to permit more of the taxes we pay, that are sitting in surplus to be transferred to the District now to plug the holes before this ship sinks.

You asked me to discuss the approaches that can be used to support expanded access to high quality early education. Oklahoma, a southern conservative state, now pays for every four year old to be in a full day high quality pre-k program through its school funding formula. Illinois also provides state funding for pre-k at levels that permit 60% of all four year olds to enroll in high quality pre-k.

Why are these states doing this? Because prominent economists of all stripes have found that attendance in high quality pre-k programs for three and four year olds prepares students to succeed in school in ways that have lasting benefits throughout life. Further, economists have found that every dollar invested in early learning programs have a larger and more lasting impact than interventions later in a child's life. I have one chart that makes this point, relatively clearly that I urge you to carefully review.

Pennsylvania offers very limited funding for Pre-K specifically. The state also provides funds to boost the quality of child care to what we consider high quality akin to Pre-K. It also modestly invests in giving more students' access to Headstart. All told about \$400 million is spent by the state between child care and early learning programs. Yet, the bulk of those funds pay for child care subsidy in programs that do not yet meet high quality standards and it's not possible to know with complete accuracy how much child care funding supports the high quality child care centers. What we do know is that due to the shortage of funds, about 40,000 three and four year old children in our city that need strong early learning programs do not have access to them in affordable highly rated settings.

There is little debate that we must expand access to high quality early learning, but our choice is not to do that and then enroll our students in a vastly under-resourced school district. No amount of early childhood education can compensate for large class sizes, schools without well prepared and support teachers or chaos in the learning environment.

The very fate of the city is linked to the fate of our children. Research shows we must invest early.

Research shows that we must invest in quality k-12. Research is very clear and the conclusion we should all draw is that we are not yet doing what the evidence says we must do to ensure all children thrive and become productive citizens.