

Testimony Presented to the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to present testimony before this esteemed Policy Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Democratic Caucus.

I commend Committee Chairman Sturla for focusing the attention of this important committee on the crisis in education caused by the legislature's adoption of the Governor's draconian \$1 billion cut in education funding coupled with his successful campaign to abandon the school funding formula adopted by the General Assembly in 2008. Representative Roebuck, we are deeply indebted to all you have done to fight for education as Minority Chair of the House Education Committee and for your 28 years of service in the Pennsylvania legislature on behalf of children. Finally, Representative Parker your fearless, fierce high stakes efforts to improve the quality of education for the nearly 1.7 million public school students in this state and especially the 130,000 students in Philadelphia has changed the terms of the debate in Harrisburg. I am here today to let you know we will do all we can to advance the cause of children with you and any lawmaker that joins with you to ensure our schools have the funds they need to offer every child a world class education.

I am also here today to tell you why we make the commitment. I trust you read yesterday's Philadelphia Inquirer where we learned that Philadelphia students at THE top high school in the state may have their hopes of getting into college thwarted because there are too few high school counselors to process the documents necessary for the college application requirements. Since kindergarten these students, their parents and their teachers did exactly what they were supposed to do, and much more. Now, due to the incompetence of the political process, their hopes for the future may be dashed. It's a national embarrassment that state budget cuts have caused a high school that ranks in the top 100 in the nation (out of more than 26,000 high schools) to be in this shape.

Masterman is a magnet high school in Philadelphia. It offers students an outstanding education and teaches the cream of the crop. If things are eroding there, imagine how bad they are in a neighborhood high school in Philadelphia. Before you do, let me share a few facts with you.

Money isn't everything but we also know that you get what you pay for. In Pennsylvania we simply aren't paying enough, at least not in our poorest urban, rural and exurban districts. While our school funding system is reliant mostly on property taxes, state funding is intended to smooth out the economic differences among our communities. But we just aren't priming the pump enough to do what's intended.

Pennsylvania is spending significantly less per student than states with superior education systems including Massachusetts and Maryland. In each of these states student performance outpaces Pennsylvania's, especially the students who are living in low income communities and or those who are low-income or minority. Take for instance, Boston, in a high school of 800 students they would have \$4,000 more per student, or \$3 million more per more per school, to support their students than Philadelphia has available for its students.

Let me share with you a few examples of what the state education cuts have meant to students in Philadelphia. I don't have hard facts but from what the district has said there are about 200 counselors across all of our schools. That means one counselor for every 600 or so students. There are real academic consequences to the shortage of counselors. Not only do students lose access to college, students who need help to stay in school, parents who are struggling to help their children and teachers who need assistance supporting a student in crisis don't have anywhere to turn. In the past, in addition to counselors, students, other staff and parents could turn to the school nurse.

Here the situation is worse. We understand that there are about 150 nurses for 213 school buildings with about 130,000 plus students, or nearly 900 students per nurse. We are near the precipice of tragedy in our schools where students with high blood pressure, asthma and other chronic illnesses are on the rise and the resources needed to keep them healthy enough to stay safely in school have all but disappeared.

Librarians are much scarcer. Most school libraries are closed, many shuttered last year and then some this year. At this point, it's probably generous to say that ten percent of district schools have librarians. I was a wreck a few weeks ago when one of the students shared with me that when they had a librarian in their school there were reading contests, support for writing reports, fun activities to introduce students to research. She told me, "That's all gone".

Art and music teachers are also scarce. It's been decades since school plays and school chorus were the norm. PCCY funds a small grant program known as the Picasso Project. Our \$5000 grant is sometimes the only funding for arts program in the entire school. Here again, we can look at what's happening to our best school, the Creative and Performing Arts High School, which is ranked in 36th in the state and among the top 5% best high schools in the nation. Last year was the first time in 17 years that the school could not afford to stage its annual production. We have some very serious problems in our schools, but affording to produce a school play should not be one of them.

These conditions are simply not acceptable. The Lower Merion School District, because of their strong local tax base, has \$5,500 more per pupil to spend than Philadelphia. The district's website reads that in addition to outstanding academics, "these funds enable the district to offer more than 500 supervised academic, athletic, community outreach and performance-oriented co-curricular programs from elementary school technology clubs to high school varsity sports." The district boasts "an array of quality facilities that support world-class educational programs, including state-of-the-art science laboratories, an 850-seat auditorium/theater, a multi-purpose black box theater, a greenhouse for environmental and horticultural studies, high-performance athletic facilities, television studios, multi-media production facilities, a musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) lab, open air courtyards, a lecture hall with tiered seating to help prepare students for the college environment, a college-style library and fully-integrated technology." Because of the very strong local tax base in Lower Merion they can support all this. They don't even have to mention how many librarians, counselors, nurses they have. Or how many school plays they can do each year. All of those basics are assumed to be in place. I applaud this district and all its local property taxpayers make possible.

Philadelphians have also stepped to the plate. They've supported more than \$190 million in tax increases and increases in City appropriations for the school district in the last two years. But these tax increases can't generate enough to compensate for the relatively low property value in the City. That's exactly why the legislature passed the school funding formula in 2008 – to give every student a shot in life with a high quality education.

The horrific state education cuts have gutted our school district and these cuts are eating away at the quality of districts across the state. Even in our neighboring suburban counties, most districts don't have the funds they need to meet the needs of their students. When you compare what these districts are spending to what they would be receiving from the state if it had completed the intended six-year rollout of the school funding formula you will find that school districts across the suburbs would have \$144 million more annually to help their students achieve at higher levels.

Before coming to a close, please permit me to remind the members of this committee today what happened in 2008. The legislature ended 17 years of distributing education funds based on mostly politics rather all on need. The Republican-controlled Senate voted unanimously and the House voted 17-to-1 to adopt the new school funding formula. The act read,

"In furtherance of the General Assembly's long standing commitment to providing adequate funding that will ensure equitable state and local investments in public education and in order to enable students to attain applicable federal and state standards, it is the goal of this Commonwealth to review and meet the state funding targets by fiscal year 2013-2014."

That's this year, and we are woefully behind. If that formula were being adhered to today, an additional \$2 billion would be available to help our students learn.

This committee's hearing today is not simply about education, it's about the future our families and our state. Right now, Pennsylvania ranks 46th among all the states in job creation and for too long our unemployment rate has been higher than the national average. These are tough and telling times. Things will not get better by putting on blinders to the root of our economic challenges.

Our state's future, even in the short term, is directly linked to the ability of our high school graduates. Our graduates will need to break in and succeed in the global marketplace where brain power rather than brute strength will decide the winner. Economists on the right and left agree that America's future rests on our human capital. The more we invest in the brain power of our students and all it takes to have their creativity, intelligence and focus thrive, the more our state will prosper.