

Testimony submitted by Donna Cooper

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Committee of the Whole

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We are in this Chamber today, in the midst of a crisis because the state cut nearly \$300 million from the Philadelphia School District's budget three years ago. As a result, we are now faced with the tough local decision of whether we permit our school district to disintegrate and dash the hopes and dreams of our children. Of course no one in this room wants that to happen. But while you debate the shortsighted proposal of shifting more sales tax collections to fund the pensions instead of the schools, the real perpetrators of our school funding crisis sit back with Cheshire cat smiles because by simply having this debate you are on the hot seat instead of them.

Even suggesting that you need to divert more of the sales tax to the pension debt is a red herring. Why? Because the current state law that directs \$120 million in sales tax revenue to the school district, also provides \$800 million for city pension payments through 2030. So the fact of the matter is that by passing an ordinance to authorize the existing state law, you will be making a huge dent in the city's \$5 billion pension debt.

The Council President's and Mayor's proposal to reduce the share of sales tax funds to the district only helps meet our pension debt two years sooner than the current law permits. To meet your pension obligation two years sooner in 2028 by decreasing the school district's resources now and every year till then by a total of a half a billion dollars robs the educational futures of our children for a rhetorical rather than substantive gain.

Instead we urge the Mayor and members of Council to work with advocates like PCCY and others to build support for the state to pass the cigarette tax increase so that our schools can avoid the layoff of hundreds of teachers. On top of that we

should be working together to build political support in Harrisburg to restore the cuts to the school district, starting first with the full restoration of the charter school reimbursement.

At Monday's City Council hearing, some members of Council questioned why the school district's performance is so poor. Lower Merion has twice the number of students who score proficient and advanced on the state assessments. That's probably not a surprise. But they do so in part because Lower Merion spends twice the amount per student than the Philadelphia School District has available. If it costs that much for Lower Merion students to reach proficiency, most of whom have parents with a college education, it's simply not reasonable to expect our district to do much better than it is with less than half the funds.

In fact, none of the successful school districts in this state are talking about how to find the funds for nurses, or counselors, or school administrators or teachers. These staff are a given in districts like Lower Merion.

If our district was to receive the full amount it requested for its budget, or \$440 million, we would enter the ranks of the well run and high achieving school districts in this state that have a librarian, nurse, a counselor or two, an art and music teacher in every building. Our District would have enough teachers to reduce class sizes where needed and help special education students achieve to their fullest potential. Our schools would be safer places with enough administrative, support and security staff because these funds could enable every large school to have assistant principals, the level of security needed as well as conflict resolution specialists and sufficient adults in study halls and cafeterias with more noon time aides. And, we could even give every child a chance to be in a club or a sport because we have the funds needed to pay teachers to meet the personal growth and enrichment of our children in after school activities.

To us this all sounds like pie in the sky, but it's exactly what parents in nearly all the 61 surrounding districts take for granted. What's different about Philadelphia? First those districts have taxing power, the Philadelphia School District does not. Second those communities have rising real estate values while Philadelphia's real estate is sluggish and much of the growth in value receives a tax abatement.

This Council has been a strong supporter of this school district. However, our School District needs more than your moral support; it needs the full \$120 million from the sales tax revenue and \$75 million more. It's time for Council to be strategic and enact the state legislation that permits the full sales tax transfer so we can all work together to put the focus back on the state to persuade the Commonwealth to do what is right by our schools.