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Leading Education Organizations and Parent Groups United in Call for Passage of Cigarette Tax for Philadelphia Schools

***Parents, School Leaders, Advocates and Faith-Based Organizations Join Together to
Call on Legislature to Pass Legislation to Prevent Further Cuts to Schools***

HARRISBURG, PA (September 16th, 2014) – A group of leading education organizations representing children, parents and advocates joined together in Harrisburg to call on the Pennsylvania House and Senate to act quickly to approve the cigarette tax legislation for Philadelphia and prevent further cuts to city schools. The Philadelphia School District opened schools last week with even fewer resources than last year. The district needs the state to enact the cigarette tax by October 1st to prevent the lay offs of hundreds of teachers and increased class sizes in public schools across the city.

Sharon Ward, Director of the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, pointed to the urgency needed to pass the legislation by saying, "The School District of Philadelphia is asking permission to raise local taxes to support schools. Without this revenue there will be fewer teachers in the classroom and fewer resources for struggling students. We urge the legislature to act on this vital legislation this week."

Darren Spielman, President and CEO of the Philadelphia Education Fund added, "Chairman Green and Dr. Hite have taken a risk on behalf of Philadelphia's children and families -- opening schools on faith that leaders in Harrisburg will make good on their promise to allow us to tax our own cigarettes to fund the schools. Now, 200,000 students, their families, and more than 8,600 teachers and principals are relying on them to deliver. Harrisburg needs to act now. Uncertainty is unacceptable, and the consequences of failure are far worse."

Susan Spicka from Education Voters of Pennsylvania joined other concerned parents and advocates at a press conference in the Capitol Tuesday to urge members of the State House and Senate to come together on an agreement of the legislation. "The political ping-pong game between House and Senate leaders has gone on for far too long and our students are the ones who are suffering. Our elected leaders need to finally come together and get this bill done for the sake of our children's futures," she said.

Jerry Jordan, President of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers said, "We can't keep opening schools without sufficient nurses, counselors, certified school librarians, art and music classes.

The PA House of Representatives can do the right thing this week by passing an amendment-free cigarette tax bill. This legislation would enable our schools to restore at least some of the programs and services our children have lost to years of cuts to education."

Michael Churchill, staff attorney for the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia said, "There's no more time to lose. Students should be focused on learning and not on whether or not their teacher will still have a job at the end of the year. It's time for the Legislature to stop playing games, approve the money needed, and not impose new costs on the District."

School and parent leaders also stand in strong support of the cigarette tax. David Hardy, CEO of Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School said "This situation requires an immediate fix as we cannot make up a lost school year."

Brian Johnson, a parent team leader for Mastery Charter School added, "We support the cigarette tax in Philadelphia for the betterment of schools because the end result is more school funding for the city of Philadelphia. A number of other Mastery parents and I traveled to Harrisburg last spring to push support for this tax because this funding will impact all schools in Philadelphia, including Mastery Charter Schools. Getting this funding is critical."

Faith-based leaders also understand how important the cigarette tax is to preventing more cuts to Philadelphia schools this year, but also understand that a long-term solution is needed to solve the school funding crisis.

"We want to see the cigarette tax passed to support our schools," said Bishop Dwayne Royster, Executive Director of POWER (Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower and Rebuild). "But we also bear witness to the great injustice that we are here to begin with. We need a full, fair funding formula for the state of Pennsylvania, so that no community - rich, poor, black, white, or brown - should have to beg for the bare minimum of funds that will barely allow us to buy paper for our schools."

Jerry Oleksiak, Vice President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association agreed saying, "Every child in the classrooms of our Commonwealth deserves a school that is safe and that creates the right environment for learning. The funding provided by this legislation is a positive step in helping our children in Philadelphia toward that goal. Much remains to be done, but this addresses needs that kids are facing right now, today, and we encourage its passage."

Donna Cooper, Executive Director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) warned that any further delay by the Pennsylvania Legislature could put schools at risk. "The Philadelphia School District's first week of school went smoothly and our kids are hard at work. This strong beginning of school will come to a complete stop if the Legislature chooses to use this bill to increase the cigarette tax rate in Philadelphia as a vehicle for other legislative priorities or as a

'Christmas tree'. The Christmas tree already fell over last June. A bill that is a clean and permanent increase of Philadelphia's tax base must make it to the Governor's desk this week" she said.

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