

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony
Presented to Philadelphia City Council
Committee on Children and Youth and Education
by Donna Cooper, Executive Director
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Thank you to the members of Council present for this important hearing examining the state of our schools. It's clear that this body has a strong commitment to making sure our school district and the students it serves succeed.

I commend Council for authorizing numerous local tax and fee increases over the last four years estimated to generate over \$400 million in new funds to support the operation of the District on an annualized basis.

As a result, Philadelphia ranks well compared to other localities in this state in making a sizeable local contribution toward the operation of the District. Unfortunately our local effort is not being matched by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which ranks near the bottom of all fifty states with respect to investment in public education at the ever important per-student level.

With more than a billion dollars of local tax revenues now being sent annually to the District, the focus of this hearing is all the more important. I am going to focus my comments on the specific student support needs in our schools because I think these needs are areas



where City and District collaboration can make a significant impact on the conditions in our schools.

In considering the conditions of our schools, it's important to remember that only a few years ago the district closed 23 schools and as a result of state budget cuts it has laid off more than 6,000 staff, including teachers, nurses, librarians and counselors since 2011. While some professionals have been rehired, the sudden budget cuts from the state decimated the District's workforce and caused talented and long serving professionals to turn to other options for employment.

In my estimation, the state's massive \$1 billion disinvestment in education is at the heart of the current high vacancy rate of teachers and nurses across the state. Basic economics teaches us that if an employment sector cannot offer reliable employment to highly sought after college and master's education professionals, then those hot commodities can enter other sectors for stable employment and, as we have seen, they will do so.

Due to the City's willingness to boost its local investment in the District, many of the laid off counselors have been hired back. That seems like good news, but the fact of the matter is that the ranks of school counselors were inadequate before the state budget cuts; they are simply less inadequate now. On a good day there is one counselor for nearly every 500 students.

To add a bit more context to our counselor shortage, think of it this way: Philadelphia School District's guidance counselor corps comprises about 6% of all guidance counselors in the state while the

District is charged with educating nearly 10% of the students enrolled in district-run public schools in the state.

Data from last year indicates that we have slightly more than 400 fewer counselors today than we had employed before the state budget cuts. As a result, we consider students lucky if they go to school with one counselor while surrounding communities offer students access to teams of support. For example, one news report highlighted this contrast last year, “George Washington High School in Philadelphia has 1,800 students and one counselor. Compared to [Plymouth Whitemarsh High School](#) in Montgomery County’s Colonial School District, which has six counselors for 1,600 students, the contrast is stark.”

For one second let’s think about the counselor shortage from the perspective of where most of our public school students attend high school. Nearly 19,500 of our high school students attend one of the District’s 19 neighborhood high schools. Across these schools there are 35 high school guidance counselors. In these schools 95% of the children are coming from families in poverty, most in very deep poverty. Unlike students in other high schools they are more likely to be ELL learners or Special Education students. These students need the help of a guidance counselor if they are going to successfully navigate their post high school path. But their student to counselor ratio is one to nearly 600 which means the support they need is unlikely to be available.

Keep in mind that even if the number of counselors rebounded to hit pre-2010 level, the District would still be far short of what’s needed to support its students and teachers. But I want to take this one step further. Guidance counselors are a must, but their productivity and

impact would be dramatically enhanced by the presence of skilled social workers in our schools.

Far too many of our students have suffered trauma, been engaged in the Child Welfare System or are homeless. The needs of these students fall to guidance counselors but the professionals who are best trained to meet the needs of these children are social workers. If the City were to integrate some of its social work corps into the District, which I've heard Mayor Kenney say he thinks is a good idea, then our guidance counselors could do their job better and our children with multiple social service needs would be more likely to succeed.

Again, let me focus back on our neighborhood high schools. These 19 schools have twice the share of students who were at some point in their lives on the DHS caseload compared to students in magnet high schools. The numbers are overwhelming and demand attention. Our neighborhood high school students need the kind of support that a highly skilled social worker can provide.

In the last five years, more than 70% of the foster care cases once carried by DHS staff have been shifted to the newly formed Community Umbrella Agency Network. While some talented DHS staff are either working in that network or supporting the transformation, I would urge us to think about how at least 400 highly skilled social workers still on the City's payroll could be deployed to our schools, starting with our neighborhood high schools, where they could both do their case work for children on their caseload and help other children and their families avoid ever becoming a DHS case in the first place.

While we are on DHS, I want to commend Council for their support of the transformation of services over the last five years and encourage Council to be actively engaged in a review of how the transformation is faring.

One part of DHS service portfolio unaffected by the transformation was the residential placement experience. Fortunately as a result of the transformation initiative, the number of children in resident placements is declining. But the outcomes from those placements with respect to high school completion are shockingly bad. In fact, only a third of the students who have had some exposure to the juvenile justice system are graduating and these young people comprise a sizeable share of the residential placement population.

CHOP's Policy Lab recently reported that graduation rates of these students rose from 15% to 36% from 2002 to 2008. Given the extraordinary cost to the city of residential placement, I urge you to consider ways to ensure that DHS, its subcontractors and the School District continue to improve this graduation rate while also decreasing the number of children in these expensive placements. These are the prototypical students in the school to prison pipeline and we simply must do better to shut off that valve. Some progress has been made in this regard.

We learned from the Public School Notebook that the District had 183 school nurses last year, most of whom split their time among 218 District schools and 95 private and parochial schools in the city. That's about one nurse for every two buildings but of course that doesn't take in to account the variance in the size of schools – in fact we have one nurse for every 1100 students in the city. Obviously this is a dangerous situation when professionals tell us that the nurse to

student ratio needs to be much lower, closer to 750 students per nurse.

Let us not forget that, on September 25, 2013, Laporshia Massey, a twelve year old student in our schools, died after suffering a severe asthma attack on a day when no nurse was present at school. The safety of our children requires us to solve this problem of too few nurses in our schools.

The less than adequate number of nurses paid for by the district to work in our schools is being exacerbated by a shortage of professionals willing to take school nurse jobs across the nation. That might suggest we need to think differently about how we solve this problem.

A large majority of the students in our schools are enrolled in the state's Medicaid program. Maybe by working with the state and the health care systems located in the city we can tackle this shortage and increase school-based health services that augment the existing nursing corps in our schools and more effectively tap the Medicaid funds already being spent on primary health care for children. Such an approach might be a way to address the barriers to hiring nurses districts across the country are facing. I know this approach is significantly more complicated than it sounds, but where there is a will there is a way. I urge Council to encourage the District to actively engage in finding models that ensure a sustainable, efficient approach that delivers high quality school based health care services that meets the real care needs of our students ASAP.

I applaud your attention to the needs of our kids. Children may be only 22 percent of the population in Philadelphia, but they are 100 percent of the future.