

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented to the Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Policy Hearing on Responsible School Re-Opening
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Good morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

As we get closer to the start of the school year ahead, parents, like myself, and students, including my children, are racked with questions about how to reopen schools safely and efficiently.

As a child advocacy organization, we want students and teachers to spend this school year in a high-quality educational setting that is accessible to all students *and* prioritizes their health and safety.

First, it is imperative that schools receive more federal funding to support them as they reopen – whether in person, virtually or in a hybrid setting.

Clearly, this pandemic has underscored the need for more robust and consistent funding for schools. While federal Cares Act money provided much needed funds as a tourniquet last spring for schools navigating the pandemic, a stronger federal investment is needed now to ensure that our schools have the tools to adapt learning no matter what the future holds or which learning model schools adopt.

Obviously, buildings should not physically reopen unless it is safe to do so. To ensure staff and student safety, districts must have the funding to provide enough staff to operate buildings and rigorously clean and sanitize classrooms in accordance with CDC guidelines.



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In fact, the Association of School Business Officers estimates that nationally, on average, each school district would require about \$1.8 million to physically reopen with adequate staff to adhere to social distancing protocols, purchase cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. With Pennsylvania school districts across the state facing an estimated \$1 billion shortfall in local revenue losses, and the Cares Act barely filling in half of that gap, school districts need more federal funding to account for losses and cover the costs to reopen.

Second, we must accept the reality that online learning will be the new normal for many students this fall. This too, costs money. To ensure access for all students, we must tear down barriers to online learning. We must work with internet providers to ensure that connectivity issues are resolved and that all students have access to high speed internet. Each student must have access to a computer that can accommodate the learning platforms and programs their schools are using to teach them.

Additionally, given the suddenness of last year's school closures and the shift to at home learning, it is vital that teachers are prepared to teach students virtually. They should receive ongoing comprehensive and robust professional development to ensure that they have the skills to use online learning platforms, assist students and their parents in navigating synchronous and asynchronous lessons and assignments, and educate our most vulnerable students – those with disabilities and English Language learners. In districts like Desert Sands, Palm Springs and Coachella Unified School Districts in California, teachers have participated in trainings and workshops in preparation for the upcoming year. If California can do it, so can Pennsylvania.

Finally, if we are asking the federal government to step up to the plate and fund our schools, and insisting that teachers adapt their skills to teach our students, then we must call up on the state to do more.

Pennsylvania consistently ranks in the bottom five when it comes to state contribution to public schools. Because our schools are inadequately and inequitably funded, many schools struggle to provide the resources necessary to ensure that students receive a solid education.

While some students kept learning through the pandemic, many students of color and poor students were not taught any new skills between March and May. If a student missed three months of school, they would be retained.

What then should the consequence be for a state that fails to adequately invest in its students over the course of generations?

Clearly, students will feel the effect of last year's losses this year. For the students in the most under-resourced districts, the effects will be felt for years to come.

We cannot keep saying we'll reform education funding next year and expect students to perform better this year – without computers, without tutors and educational support. The state must consistently invest to close funding gaps if it is serious about seeing all students achieve. We are calling on you to do just that – adequately, consistently, and equitably invest in our schools, so that they can better adapt and educate all students when another crisis arises.

It is undisputed that reopening schools in this reality is a herculean effort. Yet, it is not impossible. With adequate funding at the federal and state levels, schools can invest in the resources our students need to learn this year no matter how unprecedented it may be.