

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented Before the
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Good morning Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Tomea Sippio-Smith. I am the Education Policy Director at the child advocacy organization, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY).

This year has brought unfathomable challenges to schools, education and the families schools serve. It has also brought opportunities to address long-standing issues that if resolved, would benefit Pennsylvania's public school students and ensure that more students graduate career or college ready. We must stop talking about students being prepared for the 21st century as if we are not already living in it. Think about it, in less than 8 weeks, the 21st class of students will be graduating and entering the workforce in the 21st century.

Yet, employers continue to find far too many applicants are applying for starting positions without the requisite skills to do those jobs well. To maintain a competitive workforce, this Committee and every Pennsylvanian must focus on doing what is necessary for every student to graduate with more dynamic and advanced skills than ever before.

We understand that both the majority and minority chairs of the Senate Education Committee have a strong interest in charter school enrollment and reform. PCCY agrees that the Charter School Law is in dire need of updating; we have issued a report and drafted a very detailed checklist on proposed reforms. It was attached to this testimony for your consideration.



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It is also known that both chairs feel strongly, although likely not in agreement about Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC). There are many ways that charters and the EITC can be improved to have an impact on the students, but make no mistake, the most direct way to ensure the strength of Pennsylvania's economy is to address critical reforms that will improve traditional public schools.

That's because 92% of all public school students attend traditional public schools; that's where most of the state's incoming workforce is being educated. Yet, out of ten northeastern states, Pennsylvania ranks 9th in producing students that are prepared for college or work.

PCCY released a report two years ago, before the Pandemic that found, employers in southeastern PA were looking for more than 50,000 skilled employees. It too, was attached for your consideration. Even if the region could upskill the likeliest candidates, the region's approximately 9000 working-age unemployed and underemployed, only a fraction of the labor force's needs would be addressed. The region's annual graduating class of nearly 40,000 students is the most promising source of employees for our employers, if they are prepared for the jobs our employers need them to do.

A savvy business owner would never purchase an expensive piece of equipment, fail to adequately maintain it, and then expect it to operate at peak performance. Similarly, if we want to ensure that the workforce is skilled and competitive, we must consistently invest in our future employees, employers, small business owners and entrepreneurs, support the acquisitions of their skills and ensure that they are taught the skills PA's employers and businesses need. To do that, schools must be expected to do better and align state resources to make that possible. This committee has a significant opportunity to address this challenge. If you do not do so, Pennsylvania's economy will suffer.

To make significant gains towards meeting these challenges, we believe there are four critical areas of education reform that this Committee must tackle.

First, as this state grows more racially diverse, this Committee must delve into what is needed to ensure increase the equity of opportunity to a quality education for every child. Although Pennsylvania is about 80% white, the state has pockets of significant diversity – in Lancaster, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Erie, Pittsburgh, and the Lehigh Valley and the suburbs around these cities are home to more and more Black and Hispanic students and each year more of these students leave school and join the state’s workforce.

However, our research found that in southeastern Pennsylvania the educational experience of students of color is a very different, and not in a good way, than that of White students. For example, in the Southeastern suburban school districts, Black students are suspended at a rate 3.5 times higher than expected, 2.7 times more likely to be disciplined using law enforcement, are under-enrolled in advanced classes in 92% of the districts and are significantly more likely to attend underfunded schools. And research from the ACLU finds students of color are far more likely to formally disciplined than white students for the same infractions. Just think about how that feels to a teenager of color. There is no way that inequity can contribute to a positive learning experience for students. Add that reality to the barriers we found that students of color face as they systematically being refused admittance to honors or AP classes and it is a depressing picture. I can tell you firsthand, that I live in one of the state’s “best” school districts and my own children have been subjected to disparate treatment.

We are lucky to live in a relatively high wealth school district. But across our region, the more diverse a district is, the less funding they must spend to educate each student. The educational equity deficit in Pennsylvania is large and growing.

You can make a big difference in closing this deficit. PCCY strongly urges the Senate Education Committee to pass legislation directing the State Board of Education to update the Future Ready Index, and any successor accountability system, gauge progress by school districts with respect to improving the outcomes of students of color. Further, we urge you to consider how the state can define and require regular equity audits and hold school districts accountable for addressing equity audit findings. I urge you do this hard work so that every child can experience the true opportunity that public education should offer in Pennsylvania.

Second, we urge the Senate Education Committee to give more students access to career and technical education. There are many issues that contribute to limiting student access to these invaluable high school options, beginning with the facts found by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children that the state CTE subsidy represents less than 8 percent of the total cost to fund career and technical education and federal Carl D. Perkins funding covers roughly 2 percent of a career tech center's budget. That leaves member school districts paying approximately 90% of the overall budget to send students to career tech centers. In addition, the state's competitive equipment grants of up to \$100,000, require a \$50,000 local match and as a result defray only a fraction of costs associated with providing a quality CTE experience. Fundamentally the state's approach to funding CTE creates a clear financial disincentive to update and expand CTE options for students. At a time when many school districts in the state are continuing to struggle to meet basic education costs, the portion of the tab they are expected to pay for CTE is an added burden.

We urge the Committee to invite experts to share with you programmatic and financial models that can work and enable tens of thousands of more students to enroll in CTE programs that prepare them to graduate with an invaluable certifications or associates degrees in technical fields. Employers will hail you; parents will sing your praises and students will be indebted to you if you shift your gaze and embrace the fact that CTE is THE most urgent and potent school choice issue worthy of your attention at this critical economic juncture.

Third, we suggest a simpler but equally urgent matter for this Committee to address. We believe you must be the driver to close the digital divide for students. Many students are still struggling with connectivity and face the likelihood that temporary programs offering free or low-cost internet will expire leaving them without access again. While the cost of e-text books and getting a laptop in the hands of each student is relatively minor, the barrier remains consistent bandwidth and digital access. The state must adopt a state funding strategy that builds the cost of technology, bandwidth, digital access, and devices into the costs of funding schools.

Finally, in months ahead, thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act schools will be in a financial position to provide students with targeted services that align with their learning needs temporarily.

Yes, the federal government has appropriated significant funding to school districts.ⁱ And yes, the governor has an additional \$220 million that he can use to fund education at his discretion; these funds **cannot** be used to supplant state education funds.ⁱⁱ Pennsylvania will also receive an allocation to enhance broadband access through the Emergency Connectivity Fund.ⁱⁱⁱ This money will allow our state's schools and other organizations to provide eligible connected devices, internet services and hotspots for students and teachers to access the internet at home.^{iv} By any measure, these federal funds give us the opportunity to provide support to students.

But let's face it, the need for more teachers, librarians, counselors and psychologists is dire in the very schools educating the majority of the state's students and these are not one-time expenditures. The financial foundation of these school districts is crumbling, and I urge you not let the collapse of public education happen on your watch.

Last year, Assistant Professor Matthew Kelly of Penn State calculated district education spending deficits based on what state law says are the adequacy shortfalls, schools; in total, districts are \$4.6 billion dollars short. By many accounts, this is an underestimate because state standards are even harder today than the assumptions used for this estimate. We know that some members of the general assembly do not agree on how much more needs to be spent to prepare our children. Assuming that all the skeptics of Professor Kelly's work are sincere, then we suggest that this Committee commission a new costing out study to develop your own target. Regardless of how you do it, I can say with confidence that billions more will need to be made available to help the children of this state, and in turn, for this state's economy to succeed.

Clearly, everything I have talked about today – equity, CTE, opportunity boils down to money.

The Senate Republican leaders have directed school districts to allocate Rescue Act funds for non-recurring expenditures, which in our estimation means on that the urgent need to address the long-term issues I've outlined in this testimony must be addressed and we urge this committee to address them.

Students do not have the luxury of waiting year after year for us to get education reform right. Students needed access to 21st century skills 21 years ago. They need to graduate today – from schools that have the resources to keep pace with the skills employers need today, that close equity gaps for students, that support education whether their next steps are college or directly into careers and have continual access to knowledge. It should not take another pandemic for the state to invest in our schools adequately, consistently, and equitably. The Senate Education Committee can get it right today. Please do not squander this opportunity.

ⁱ *Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II) Authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021*. 2021.

Retrieved from [Final_ESSERII_Methodology_Table_1.5.21.pdf \(ed.gov\)](#)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ *CHAPTER 2—DISTANCE LEARNING and 2 CONSUMER PROTECTION during the 3 COVID-19 PANDEMIC 4 SEC. 3311. FUNDING for CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY 5 FUND to PROTECT CONSUMERS from PO6 TENTIALLY DANGEROUS PRODUCTS RELATED to COVID-19*. 2021. Retrieved from

[C:\Users\KLMERY~1\AppData\Roaming\SoftQuad\XMetaL\11.0\gen\c\OP_02.XML \(house.gov\)](#)

^{iv} Ibid.