



Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council

By Priyanka Reyes-Kaura

Children First K-12 Education Policy Director

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Children First is fully in support of the Joy Campaign because we know that joyful school environments promote student learning, positive physical and mental health outcomes, and safer communities.

As a former teacher at an under-resourced urban school, I know how common it is for classrooms to become stripped of happiness. When schools are running on shoestring budgets and are short-staffed, school administrators can prioritize order, structure, and a desire to simply get through the day. This comes at the expense of nurturing young minds with creativity, love, and age-appropriate fun. I have personally witnessed and had to enforce silent hallways, silent lunches, and police-like disciplinary practices that broke my heart and pushed me out of the classroom and into advocacy. These inhumane practices would never happen in the well-resourced school districts a few miles out of the city and they run counter to our shared goals of welcoming schools and well-rounded students.

One of the ways we need to cultivate joy is by investing in our teacher workforce. Allow me to share some data on a few elements that are currently preventing Philadelphia's schools from being characterized by joy:

1. **High student-teacher ratios:** the maximum number of students allowed in classrooms is 30 students for grades K-3 and 33 students for grades 4 and above. These are enormous class sizes that must be reduced. In many sections of the city, overflowing classrooms are the reality. When teachers are struggling to manage over 30 students, they will often rely on harsh classroom discipline and they will struggle to build meaningful student-teacher relationships that could unlock deep learning. Smaller classrooms are often more joyful because students have better relationships with each other and with their teachers.
2. **Low teacher salaries:** Children First's recent report, A Decade of Stalled Progress, we found wide gaps in teachers' starting pay ranging from \$54,156 at the School District of Philadelphia to \$63,750 in nearby Wallingford-Swarthmore and \$63,858 in Upper Dublin. Of course, the salary discrepancies only get exacerbated further up the pay scales. Differences in salaries make it much more attractive for teachers to choose wealthier school districts when we need those teachers to stay here in Philadelphia.
3. **Shortages of teachers qualified to meet student needs:** Philadelphia has a severe teacher shortage and needs more than 2,000 new teachers to meet all students' needs. The supply of teachers decreased 31% in the past 10 years, and currently 19% of teachers are currently on emergency permits, with another 16% teaching out of the area they were certified in, according to the PA Needs Teachers campaign.

- 4. High teacher attrition, especially for Black teachers:** Having a teacher who looks like you has positive impacts on student learning and reduces the use of exclusionary discipline – not to mention the infusion of joy that can happen when students can relate to their teachers on this level. But Philadelphia is losing Black teachers at alarming rates. Between 2001 – 2021, the number of Black teachers in Philadelphia schools decreased by almost 1,200 according to Research for Action.

At Children First, we are deeply invested in guaranteeing every child in Philadelphia a high-quality education. We must prioritize joy in our city's classrooms and throughout the school system, and we must invest in the staff and programs to make it happen.

References:

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