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Testimony to Philadelphia City Council
Millage Increase in the FY26 Philadelphia budget
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Hello. My name is Symbol Lai. I'm with Children First.

I want to thank the Councilmembers who asked for a 1% increase in the millage transfer to the School District of Philadelphia in this year's budget. This bump generates \$25 million in new, recurring funding to Philly schools.

Last week, during the district's budget hearing, I heard many of you ask about the lack of anti-bullying programs, counselors, and steady teachers. It's clear you care about education, and I want to encourage Councilmembers to think about underfunding as a root cause of the instability you'd like to fix.

The School District is \$1.2 billion underfunded. People are fighting to fix this at the state, but the state isn't the only player. City funds comprise 44% of the district's budget, which means - you, councilmembers - have a hand in getting our schools to equity faster.

I also want to point out that asking the district to dip into its fund balance is not a sound plan. Children First testified to this, but it's worth repeating: the district's fund balance is there for emergencies, not regular operations. As it stands, the fund balance is enough to get the district through 4.5 weeks of operations. A year is 52 weeks.

Last, I want to share the stories of parents who can't come to City Hall. I sent out an urgent call when I was preparing and here's what I got back.

Melissa Rothermal has 3 kids with special needs. She knows that more funding means a better chance for her kids get better services.

Imani Badie cares about literacy. She knows that kids are more likely to end up in prison if they don't know how to read. More funding prevents this.

Donna Fields testified last week, but she's not done. She wants you to know about the fights, the lockdowns, and even the suicide rates she's seen in her school. She's emphatic that schools need more money to do more.

Jazmin Banks says that if we want to dismantle the school and foster care to prison pipeline, we need to invest in schools. She quotes Frederick Douglass, who said "it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

Ronda Montgomery says she shouldn't have to dip into her rent money to buy cleaning supplies so her kid doesn't get sick.

And, Samia Evans Bolling wants to remind you that when we invest in our children, we invest in ourselves, our communities, and our city.

City Council, we want \$25 million in local funding to our schools. Increase the millage transfer by 1%.

Thank you.