

Dr. Tony Watlington Testimony for the Basic Education Funding Commission
Sept. 14, 2023
Philadelphia

Good Afternoon, Co-Chairman Representative Sturla, Co-Chair Senator Phillips-Hill, and Commission Members.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Basic Education Funding Commission.

I am Dr. Tony Watlington, Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia.

Today, I stand before you with a deep sense of urgency and hope for the future of our students. The Commonwealth's children are its most precious resource, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that they receive the education they deserve.

Nearly two years ago, my predecessor, former Superintendent Dr. William Hite, Jr. and Uri Monson, current Secretary of the Budget and previous Deputy Superintendent and Chief Financial Officer for the School District, took the stand and testified - along with colleagues from across the commonwealth - about the devastating impact of Pennsylvania's inadequate and inequitable school funding.

The Pennsylvania public school funding system has inadequately and inequitably funded low-wealth school districts for decades. The funding system systematically harmed the very districts that need the most resources to support student populations – those districts who serve students with the greatest needs.

These students are the future of Pennsylvania - and we are failing to provide for them. This is true across Pennsylvania, but is certainly true here, in Philadelphia, where we are continually forced to parse insufficient resources, resources which cannot meet the varying needs of our students and staff.

When schools are adequately funded, they can attract and retain highly qualified teachers, provide up-to-date resources and materials, and offer a wide range of extracurricular activities. All of these elements are essential to creating an environment where students can thrive academically.

First, I would like to provide you with information on the District. We are the eighth largest school district in the nation and the largest district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We are a community working together with parents, families, volunteers and community members to support the limitless potential of students attending our schools.

We are proud of the progress we have made over time. In fact, last school year, we improved student attendance and teachers attendance and reduced the number of students who dropped out of school in grades 7 through 12.

We have also stabilized our finances and made targeted investments. Since 2017, we have regained local control of the District and our bond rating has been upgraded to investment grade for the first time since 1977. And, last spring, the District's ratings outlook was upgraded from stable to positive by both Moody's Investor Services and Fitch Ratings, Inc. With new funding from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia, we invested in our students and schools.

We've also invested in our buildings by modernizing classrooms, upgrading technology for students and staff, making much-needed repairs and remediating environmental hazards. Over the next five years, the District will spend almost \$2.5 billion to improve our learning environments, including the construction of three new school buildings and nearly \$450 million in major renovations.

At every Board of Education meeting, we hear from the public about the pressing need to invest in our staff, school facilities, and instructional resources. We know and agree - investing in these areas has been shown to increase the academic success and the well-being of our students and staff.

Last year, during my first 100 days, I conducted 90 "Listening and Learning" sessions across the City of Philadelphia and issued a survey that engaged a total of nearly 3,000 community stakeholders. Through this extensive engagement, I had the opportunity to engage with students, families, educators, school leaders, central office and school-based staff, faith-based leaders, business leaders, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, and advocacy and community groups.

Following the listening and learning sessions, we assembled a transition team that harnessed the collective power of more than 100 members of the Philadelphia community, including a few local and national K-12 education experts. Specifically, the team was composed of students, parents, teachers, principals, district leaders, union leaders, national educational leaders, city leaders, business leaders, non-profit leaders, grassroots leaders, and other SDP staff. These members brought their local knowledge, experiences, and expertise to review quantitative and qualitative information, educational research, and best practices to develop recommendations to shape the district's future priorities.

The third phase of the transition process focused on the development of the strategic plan. More than 200 members of the District community participated in three groups that contributed to the development of the School District's five-year strategic plan, Accelerate Philly.

The strategic plan draws on the themes that emerged from the Listening and Learning Tour, the recommendations from the Transition Team Report, and the personal experiences of the individuals who participated in the strategic planning process. Through that collaboration, the strategic plan identifies five priority areas and 63 strategic actions. I have submitted the plan as an additional document for the Commission.

Priority Area 1 within the strategic plan is Improve safety and well-being (physical, social-emotional, and environmental). We recognize that Safe environments are critical for our students and staff to learn and grow. This includes physical, social-emotional, and environmental safety. That is why we have identified 11 strategic actions to improve this area, but will be focusing on implementing two key strategic actions this year:

- Strategic Action 1.1: Establish a facilities master plan project team, including internal and external stakeholders, to identify a process and the investments needed to significantly improve academic achievement and to achieve Guardrails 1 and 2.
- Strategic Action 1.2: Improve management of environmental conditions and hazards by hiring an administrator and investing in a modern data management system.

We know our aging school infrastructure needs significant upgrades. The average age of our schools is more than 73 years old. Some of the District's oldest buildings are 120 years old.

In 2017, Parsons completed a Facility Conditions Assessment Report for the School District, which identified the structural issues in each of our buildings. The study identified \$4.9 billion of deferred maintenance across the School District's facilities, a cost which has grown since with inflation and age of facilities. To build 21st century learning environments – learning environments our students and staff deserve – was estimated to cost \$7.9 billion in 2017.

The skills and knowledge needed for success in today's world are vastly different from what was required just a few decades ago. We must adapt and provide our students with modern, innovative learning environments that reflect the realities of the world they will enter upon graduation.

Philadelphia's students deserve 21st-century learning environments equipped with state-of-the-art technology, appropriate science labs, and the very best instructional resources. They deserve classrooms that foster creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. They need opportunities to engage with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, arts, and vocational training. These experiences will prepare them for the diverse and rapidly changing job market that awaits them.

Sustained funding means bringing air conditioning to all of our schools, which currently 57% of our schools do not have so that more of our students can have access to learning in the summer to prevent summer slide. In buildings as old as ours this not only means purchasing air conditioners, but increasing electrical capacity and examining potential environmental impacts of installation.

In addition we know that children across the Commonwealth are struggling with mental health as we return to school after Covid. At the School District, we are committed to caring for the mental health and well-being of our students, and offering them opportunities to care for themselves. That is why we launched Kooth this year – an online mental health and well-being

platform designed to provide access to personalized, digital mental health and wellbeing resources.

Since February, hundreds of Philadelphia students have experienced the benefits of Kooth. They have accessed the online counseling, used the peer-to-peer support features, shared the digital resources, and more. We will continue to encourage even more students to use Kooth if and when they need it.

At the District, we are striving to achieve the Board's Goals and Guardrails, as we aspire to become the fastest improving large, urban school district in the country and we know exactly what to do under our strategic plan Accelerate Philly. However, we need adequate funding and resources.

According to PA Schools Work, adequate state funding for Philadelphia would mean an additional \$5,015 per student. This infusion of funding would enable our students to have the same opportunities for a high-quality education as their peers across the Commonwealth.

With the additional funding, as a district, we would be positioned to shift the conversation from how to invest limited resources to how we accelerate academic achievement by focusing on robust academic programming that takes place in 21st-century learning environments.

We ask this Committee to give the students of Philadelphia the funding this committee recommended in 2016 - so that all Pennsylvania students have equal opportunity to achieve.

The Fair Funding trial showcased that equitable and adequate funding for education in Pennsylvania is truly a state-wide issue that affects all of us. Over 428 school districts in the Commonwealth are not receiving an adequate share of funding from the state.

We are all asking this Committee - and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania - to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to a high-quality education that prepares them for success in the 21st century. Our children absolutely deserve an educational landscape where every student can reach their full potential and contribute to the prosperity and growth of their community.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today.



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

ACCELERATE PHILLY

2023-2028 Strategic Plan



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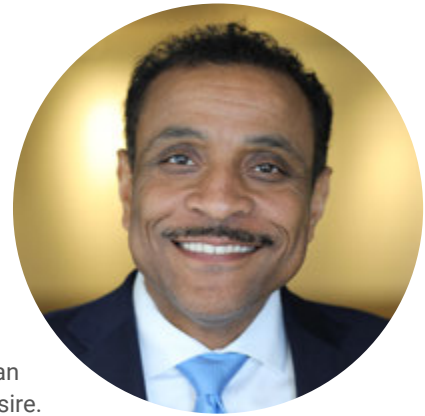
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A Letter From the Superintendent

Dear School District of Philadelphia students, families, staff,
and community members,

I present to you *Accelerate Philly*, the School District of Philadelphia's strategic plan. This strategic plan prioritizes student and staff safety, establishes deep partnerships with our community, and focuses our resources on proven, research-based strategies to improve student achievement. If we work together as one united Philadelphia, we absolutely can become the fastest improving urban school district in the nation and prepare all students to realize any future they desire.



This strategic plan is the culmination of months of hard work and insights from community members across this city including students, teachers, school-based staff, principals, central office leaders, union leaders, community members, and Board of Education members. It will inform how we align our District resources, including time, budget, and professional learning, over the next five years. While these steps may seem simple, they require focus, accountability, and consistent follow-through. I would like to express my gratitude to those who contributed to this plan and look forward to continued collaboration.

Philadelphia is a special place. Our children have proven themselves to be resilient, and we are in a unique moment in time where we have the people, the constitutional commitment to resources, and the collective dedication to accelerate growth for all students. Now is the time for us as a community to come together to execute on a plan that ensures that our students are more than just college and career ready – we need to help our students realize the futures they desire. To accomplish this, we must prioritize our children by thinking differently about how all agencies within this city collaborate with the business and non-profit community, as well as parents and guardians to position our children to take their place as leaders in this wonderful city where the Declaration of Independence was signed. Philadelphia should be the place where the nation looks to see what equity and excellence looks like in action. We have much hard work ahead of us, but our vision for our future is clear and compelling.

My Listening and Learning Tour and the Transition Team Report made clear that we needed to rethink how we engage with families, partner with the community, and communicate broadly. This year, I have worked with a fierce sense of urgency and collaborated with our students, families, staff, city and state leaders, unions, universities, activists, grassroots organizations, and business leaders to improve the experiences of the children we serve. *Accelerate Philly* will continue to build on these initial efforts.

As a father, former teacher, and former principal, I know all parents have hopes and dreams for their children. Parents look toward schools to partner with them to help children reach their innate potential. We can accelerate our performance and place our children on a trajectory of success by focusing on a limited number of research-driven strategies and being relentless about knowing our children and responding to their needs.

Accelerate Philly is our roadmap to accelerating our progress and transforming outcomes for our students. Its implementation marks the launch of a collaborative journey towards excellence. This will be hard work, but our children are counting on us to create life-changing opportunities and outcomes for them and their families. I will continue to ask “How are the children?”, and look forward to when we can confidently answer, “All the children are well!”

I thank you for the opportunity to work together. Our best days are ahead.

In partnership,

Tony B. Watlington, Sr., Ed.D.
Superintendent



Overview

Accelerate Philly is the roadmap for serving our students, families, staff, and community over the next five years and represents the final Phase of Dr. Watlington’s three-phase transition process. Phase 1 began in June 2022, where he engaged in an extensive [Listening and Learning Tour](#) with over 3,000 people across Philadelphia to hear what the District does well, what needs improvement, and how we can work more collaboratively. Phase 2 was the Transition Team, in which over 100 participants reviewed the current state of the District. In October 2022, they presented ninety-one [recommendations](#) to guide immediate and future actions.

In January 2023, and in alignment to Dr. Watlington’s commitment to “nothing for us without us”, over 200 members of our District community participated in three groups that contributed to the development of *Accelerate Philly*. These individuals represented a wide range of roles at schools and in District offices, as well as the diversity of the District and every region of the city. They drew on their varied identities, experiences, and viewpoints throughout the process. These groups, in collaboration with Dr. Watlington and the Board of Education, engaged in a multi-stage process to develop *Accelerate Philly*:

- **Leadership Team:** 25 school-based staff, school leaders, and central office leaders that served as the decision-making body for the strategic plan.
- **Steering Committee:** 60 students, parents and guardians, school-based staff, school leaders, and central office staff from across Philadelphia that generated the content of the strategic plan, which was reviewed by the Leadership Team.
- **Advisory Groups:** Groups of community members, including parents and guardians, principals, teachers, school support staff, students, union leadership, and central office staff, who provided critical insights and feedback as the strategic plan was developed.

Drawing on the themes that emerged from the Listening and Learning Tour, the recommendations from the Transition Team Report, and the lived experiences of the individuals who participated in the strategic planning process, we identified 5 Priority Areas and 62 Strategic Actions. Moving forward, we will align our resources to these Priority Areas and Strategic Actions to raise student achievement and accelerate progress toward achieving the [Goals and Guardrails](#).

To reach our collective goals, *Accelerate Philly* must be implemented thoughtfully and carefully. A key consideration is the availability and allocation of District resources, including people, funding, and time. Therefore, not all Strategic Actions will be implemented at the same time. Each Strategic Action will follow four implementation phases between the 2023-24 school year and the 2027-28 school year:

- **Implementation planning:** Teams develop specific plans that include who will lead the Strategic Action, resources needed, ways to measure progress, and potential barriers to implementation.
- **Initial implementation:** Teams begin implementing the Strategic Action, regularly assess effectiveness, and make adjustments to the implementation of the strategic action before fully implementing it.
- **Full implementation:** Teams fully implement the Strategic Action and ensure there are enough resources and support for effective implementation throughout the district.
- **Sustained implementation:** Teams monitor the effectiveness of full implementation and consistently make necessary adjustments to the Strategic Action to ensure it can be sustained over time.

Equity, transparency, and collaboration have been central to the Strategic Planning Process and will continue to guide the implementation of our Strategic Actions. The following equity questions, adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, will be answered at each phase in the implementation process.



These questions will enable us to make decisions that center student and school community needs:

1. Are all stakeholder groups that are affected by the policy, practice, decision, or action at the table?
2. How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action affect each group?
3. How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action be perceived by each group?
4. Does the policy, practice, decision, or action worsen or ignore existing disparities?
5. Based on the above responses, what revisions are needed to the policy, practice, decision, or action under discussion?

As we implement *Accelerate Philly* over the next five years, we must hold ourselves accountable and be transparent about our collective successes and challenges. The Superintendent will provide annual updates to the Board of Education and the community on our progress. These updates will also guide future Board of Education decisions on policy, spending, and other needed resources to support the District in successfully implementing the plan. *Accelerate Philly* is a living document and will be regularly assessed to determine intentional, targeted adjustments to Strategic Actions as new lessons are learned.

Our journey is just beginning. Together, we can accelerate progress for all students and become the fastest improving large, urban school district in the nation.

Our journey is just beginning. Together, we can accelerate progress for all students and become the fastest improving large, urban school district in the nation.

– Superintendent Tony B. Watlington, Sr., Ed.D.

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GOALS AND GUARDRAILS



The Board of Education established Goals and Guardrails that outline what our students must know and be able to accomplish and describe the conditions needed in each school to empower all students to succeed in and beyond the classroom. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all students perform at or above grade level in schools that are safe and welcoming, offer well-rounded opportunities, and dismantle racist systems and practices. The Goals and Guardrails ensure coordinated efforts across the District to drive improved student success and serve as the long-term measurable outcomes for the Strategic Plan. By focusing on the Strategic Actions outlined in this plan, the District will accelerate its progress toward achieving the Goals and Guardrails.

Goals

1. The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who are proficient on the state English Language Arts (ELA) assessment.
2. The percentage of 3rd grade students who are proficient on the state English Language Arts (ELA) assessment.
3. The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who are proficient on the state Math assessment.
4. The percentage of students who are proficient on all three state high school assessments (Algebra, Literature, and Biology) by the end of their 11th grade year.
5. The percentage of Career and Technical Education (CTE) students who pass an industry standards-based competency assessment by the end of their 12th grade year will grow.

Guardrails

1. Every school will be a safe, welcoming and healthy place where our students, staff and community want to be and learn each day. This means that our schools will be: (1) environmentally safe and clean; and (2) spaces with inclusive climates that provide students with access to robust social, emotional, and mental health supports.
2. Every student will have a well-rounded education with arts, athletics, and other co-curricular opportunities integrated into the school experience.
3. Every parent and guardian will be welcomed and encouraged to be partners in their child's school community.
4. Our students' potential will not be limited by practices that perpetuate systemic racism and hinder student achievement.

The Board of Education is currently evaluating the Goal and Guardrail trajectories, targets, and leading indicators to extend through the end of the Strategic Plan and accurately measure progress.

WHAT WE BELIEVE



The strategic plan Advisory Groups, Steering Committee, Leadership Team, and Board of Education provided feedback and insights to generate a revised District-wide vision and mission, core values, and a new theory of action. These elements will serve as the foundation for the strategic plan.

Vision

To prepare students to imagine and realize any future they desire.

Mission

All sectors of public education in Philadelphia will work with urgency to provide every student with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes in partnership with diverse families, educators, and community members who are valued and respected.

Core Values

- **Safety** is imperative to our work.
- **Equity** requires needs-based distribution of resources.
- **Collaboration** involves gathering and honoring community voices.
- **Joy** inspires active engagement and belonging.
- **Trust** is built through good communication, public transparency, and holding ourselves accountable.
- **Ambition** requires us to work with urgency to accelerate student achievement.

Theory of Action

When we focus on...

- Engaging with families and community members in the education of all students;
- Prioritizing the social-emotional well-being, mental health, and intellectual and physical safety of all students and staff;
- Centering schools and school leadership teams as the units of change;
- Advancing equity through everything we do and every decision we make; and
- Aligning our resources, trainings, and accountability structures to a limited number of innovative and research based priorities

Then we will reach the Goals and Guardrails and transform learning and life outcomes for all students.

PRIORITY AREA 1



Improve safety and well-being (physical, social-emotional, and environmental)

Safe environments are critical for our students and staff to learn and grow. This includes physical, social-emotional, and environmental safety. To make strides in these areas, our approach must be collaborative – including the District, the City of Philadelphia, and our partners throughout the community. As these Strategic Actions are implemented, students, staff, and families will see improvements in physical learning spaces, more consistent access to mental and behavioral health services, greater social-emotional supports, and an increased sense of safety in school buildings.

Strategic Actions

1.1 Establish a facilities master plan project team, including internal and external stakeholders, to identify a process and investments needed to significantly improve academic achievement and to achieve Guardrails 1 and 2.

1.2 Improve management of environmental conditions and hazards by hiring an administrator and investing in a modern data management system.

Why is this urgent? Our students' perceptions of building conditions are related to their feelings of belonging, safety, and trust at their schools. During Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared serious concerns about lead and asbestos remediation, lack of air conditioning, and needed upgrades to electrical and security systems in school buildings. A 2017 report estimated the replacement value to facilities across the district to be \$7.8 billion dollars.

Why these strategies? Spatial configurations impact students' and teachers' ability to perform. To maximize learning, students need clean air, good light, and a quiet, comfortable, and safe learning environment. High quality teachers tend to transfer to schools with better facilities when given the opportunity. Additionally, a recent study found that school facility improvements in Los Angeles had a positive impact on test scores and attendance, yielding a strong return-on-investment of \$1.62 for every \$1 spent.

Aligns with: All Goals, Guardrails 1 and 2; Transition Team Recommendations

1.3 Replace all analog security cameras at 150 schools.

1.4 Pilot and evaluate Opengate weapons detection technology for stand-alone middle schools.

Why is this urgent? Philadelphians believe that Dr. Watlington's first priority as Superintendent should be school climate and safety. In 2022, Philadelphia recorded over 15,000 violent crime offenses, including over 4,000 shooting incidences. District stakeholders feel that, at the most basic level, school building doors, locks, and cameras are essential for security, yet they are not always functioning properly. On the annual survey, only 55% of students reported that they feel safe in their school hallways.

Why these strategies? Safe schools are places where students are safe from violence, bullying and harassment, and the influence of substance abuse. Decades of research have shown that when students do not feel safe in school, they suffer socio-emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. Internal research shows that teacher retention is linked to teacher perceptions of school climate and safety. Working cameras outside of the school building have been shown to improve students' perceptions of safety. The Opengate technology identifies threats to safety by detecting specific types of weapons, such as assault rifles (it is not designed to detect lesser threats, such as knives).

Aligns with: Guardrail 1

1.5 Expand the Safe Path Program in partnership with foundations and city and state funders.

Why is this urgent? On the annual survey, 51% of students indicated that they have safety concerns going to or from school. Over 60% of students said they do not feel safe in the neighborhood surrounding their schools. Two-thirds of leaders said that neighborhood crime/safety is a challenge to student learning. During Listening and Learning sessions, students noted that neighborhood crime/safety impacts their ability to attend school.

Why this strategy? Research on the Safe Passage Program in Chicago found that it had a significant impact on reducing crime near schools. It is an important component of addressing stakeholder concerns, including students having to travel far distances and through unsafe conditions to get to their school, which is a barrier to regular, on-time attendance.

Aligns with: Guardrail 1; Transition Team Recommendations

1.6 Develop a bridge program for students transitioning back from placement at Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center, Pennypack House, and other long-term placements.

Why is this urgent? Over the past two school years, approximately 1,000 students transitioned back to a general education setting from long-term facilities, dependent placements, or mental health hospitals. These students are more likely to have experienced trauma and neglect and more than twice as likely to drop out of school than students who have not been sent to an alternative setting. However, when formerly incarcerated youth return to and attend school regularly, they reduce their chances of reincarceration and dropping out. Themes from Listening and Learning sessions with school leaders indicate a need to improve the coordination of services for students returning from placement, including collaboratively identifying the school that can best meet the needs and interests of each student and ensuring that every student is fully supported in adapting to and thriving in the new environment. School leaders also noted that transitional supports often do not last long enough to meet the extensive needs of returning students. Ideally, school leaders would like students to have the opportunity to participate in interim programming aimed at supporting their transition back to the general education setting.

Why this strategy? Students returning from long-term placement benefit from high levels of adult support and service coordination, which schools do not always have the capacity to provide. Supportive interventions, such as mentoring and restorative practices, can have a positive effect on attitudes about school for students who are transitioning back from a long-term placement. For students with intensive needs, educational programs that can “bridge” the gap between a long-term placement and a traditional learning environment can focus on providing these supports in order to fully prepare the learner to return to a traditional school setting.

Aligns with: Goal 4 and Guardrail 1

1.7 Identify, audit, and improve school climate programs.

Why is this urgent? National research strongly links school climate with student attendance, academic achievement, persistence to graduation, and teacher attendance and retention. In the District, when accounting for school-level student demographics, responses to climate questions on the student, parent/guardian, and teacher surveys were all significantly predictive of school-level math and reading proficiency. Fewer than half of student respondents on the annual survey indicated that they consistently feel like they belong at school (36%); feel welcome at school (45%); and enjoy being at school (31%). This is particularly concerning given that there is a strong link between academic achievement and how students feel in school. Evidence-based social-emotional and climate programs can significantly improve overall climate and students’ positive feelings about school; however, implementation data reveals that many schools struggle to implement these programs with fidelity.

Why this strategy? The District currently supports three evidence-based school wide social-emotional and restorative climate approaches: Culturally Responsive Relevant Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CR-PBIS); Schoolwide Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Relationships First (RF). Schools select their schoolwide approaches during the school planning process. When PBIS is implemented with fidelity, there are positive outcomes for students, such as reductions in suspensions and truancy, and gains in reading and math achievement. Schoolwide SEL practices in schools provide short- and long-term benefits to students’ well-being, prosocial behaviors, and avoidance of high-risk behaviors (e.g. substance abuse). These impacts persist regardless of parental income or race. The Relationships First program, which was modeled after Oakland Unified School District’s restorative justice program, is associated in multiple studies with decreases in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals for violent offenses, and with large gains in academic achievement. Strong implementation of these programs can be expected to improve outcomes in all of these areas.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 4

1.8 Identify, audit, and improve mental and behavioral health services in partnership with the City of Philadelphia.

Why is this urgent? Exposure to chronic childhood trauma significantly increases the risk of developing mental health disorders, which in turn negatively impact academic achievement. Results of the Philadelphia Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that over 39% of District students have experienced traumatic events, including witnessing physical abuse in their home and violence in their community. Nearly all school leaders (91%) identified mental health as a significant challenge in their school, according to the annual survey. In addition, during Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared that the District has insufficient staff to meet students’ mental health and social-emotional needs, particularly in the midst of Philadelphia’s gun violence epidemic. Schools need more trauma-informed approaches, more counselors, and more caring adults to listen and understand students’ experiences.

Why this strategy? The Institute of Education Sciences has identified several trauma-informed mental and behavioral health services that have promising evidence when implemented with fidelity. They can improve outcomes for students, including the reduction in trauma-related symptoms. Several of these evidence-based programs are currently being implemented by the District, but we have yet to evaluate implementation or effectiveness.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 4

1.9 Recruit and retain certified school nurses for all schools to provide in-person or telehealth services depending on student need.

Why is this urgent? Chronic health conditions are a barrier to learning for many District students. On the Philadelphia Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 25% of high school students reported being told by a doctor or nurse that they had asthma, and 34% reported that their physical health was not good. Echoing this self-reported data, in the annual survey, 40% of school leaders reported that chronic illness was a great or moderate challenge to student learning. Recognizing the severity of health-related barriers to learning, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) PolicyLab recommended that the District implement more optimal school nurse staffing models and supports to adequately respond to the volume and complexity of our students' health needs. Over the past three years, the District has had a year-end nurse vacancy rate of between 3% and 6%.

Why this strategy? The presence of a full-time school nurse is associated with reduced absenteeism and missed class time, particularly for students with asthma, students living in poverty, and African-American students. Emerging research shows that when in-person nurses are not available, telehealth services can be a valuable resource for expanding access to health services, which can result in better management of chronic conditions, improved education, reduced travel time and expenses, and fewer absences from school and work.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 4; Transition Team Recommendations

1.10 Implement Breakfast After the Bell at all schools and offer sufficient, healthy, and appetizing food during appropriate meal times to all students.

Why is this urgent? Food-insecure children are more likely to have lower grades and test scores and to experience developmental delays, social-emotional and behavioral problems, and suspensions. District families report double the rate of food insecurity compared to state and national averages. On the annual survey, 41% of principals identified food insecurity as a great or moderate challenge to student learning. During Listening and Learning sessions, students, school staff, families, and community members shared that hunger is a challenge to student learning, and that not all District students have equitable access to healthy and appetizing school food. Students also noted that access to appetizing food promotes regular student attendance. On the annual survey, 48% of students disagreed that their school lunch tastes good and 44% disagreed that they got enough food to fill them up. Although all schools serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to families, participation varies due to meal timing and student perceptions of food quality and taste. District research found that students encounter barriers to getting to school early enough to access free school breakfast prior to the start of school. Additionally, lunch schedules vary from as early as 9:30am to as late as 1:30pm. When breakfast and lunch intervals are not aligned well, this can mean that students are hungry while in class.

Why this strategy? There are positive associations between school meal programs, including Breakfast After the Bell, and improved diet quality and food security, increased academic performance and attendance (particularly for food-insecure or malnourished students). District research found increased breakfast participation rates in schools with Breakfast After the Bell programs. Additionally, principals and school staff believe that offering popular items, such as fresh fruit and hot breakfast foods (e.g., egg sandwiches) increases breakfast participation. Ensuring that students have adequate time to eat at appropriate times during the school day means they have the energy needed to focus on learning.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 4

1.11 Implement recess supervised by trained staff and aligned to national best practices for all K-8 students.

Why is this urgent? Bullying and other negative social behaviors are most likely to occur during unstructured time in the school day, such as recess. On the annual survey, about one-third of students reported being bullied at school, and nearly 75% of students reported that students in their school are bullied. Students who are bullied are more likely to be anxious, depressed, and have a harder time focusing on school. During Listening and Learning sessions, students cited bullying and negative relationships with peers as barriers to regular student attendance.

Why this strategy? High-quality recess requires a safe physical space, adult supervision, and planning and organization of play activities. Schools implementing supervised recess models show improvements in overall safety, reductions in bullying, and decreased behavioral disruptions in class. Findings from a District evaluation of Playworks TeamUp, one such model of supervised recess, indicate that school staff have largely positive feedback, but need additional staff capacity to implement with fidelity.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 4

Improve safety and well-being

The chart below shows the School Year (SY) in which each Priority Area 1 Strategic Action will be implemented. The shaded areas for each Strategic Action represent when each action is planned to be in initial, full, and sustained implementation phases (see "Overview" section on p.5). The chart also shows the targeted Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 investments. In future years, the District will make investment decisions in the annual budgeting process.

Strategic Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	(SY 23-24)	(SY 24-25)	(SY 25-26)	(SY 26-27)	(SY 27-28)
1.1 Establish a facilities master plan project team, including internal and external stakeholders, to identify a process and investments needed to significantly improve academic achievement and to achieve Guardrails 1 and 2.	\$2,260,590				
1.2 Improve management of environmental conditions and hazards by hiring an administrator and investing in a modern data management system.	\$5,796,968				
1.3 Replace all analog security cameras at 150 schools.	\$13,492,303				
1.4 Pilot and evaluate Opengate weapons detection technology for stand-alone middle schools.	\$332,885				
1.5 Expand the Safe Path Program in partnership with foundations and city and state funders.	\$2,225,000				
1.6 Develop a bridge program for students transitioning back from placement at Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center, Pennypack House, and other long-term placements.	\$500,000				
1.7 Identify, audit, and improve school climate programs.	\$25,000				
1.8 Identify, audit, and improve mental and behavioral health services in partnership with the City of Philadelphia.	\$10,000				
1.9 Recruit and retain certified school nurses for all schools to provide in-person or telehealth services depending on student need.					
1.10 Implement Breakfast After the Bell at all schools and offer sufficient, healthy, and appetizing food during appropriate meal times to all students.					
1.11 Implement recess supervised by trained staff and aligned to national best practices for all K-8 students.	No Additional Cost				

Total Targeted FY 2024 Investments: \$24.6M

PRIORITY AREA 2



Partner with families and community

To live our core values of trust and collaboration, the District must foster trusting relationships with students, families, staff, and the entire Philadelphia community through transparent communication and frequent opportunities for partnership. Students, families, and staff expect the District to provide necessary information in an accessible and timely manner and to offer consistent opportunities for engagement to join in our work. Community partners expect clarity, consistency, and access to information to support relationships between the District and the Philadelphia community.

Forging strong partnerships and creating clear collaborative structures between the District and our broader community will enable us all to collectively support accelerated student achievement. Through the implementation of these Strategic Actions, families, students, staff, and community members will have greater access to information and timely responses, expanded access to enriching and well-rounded co-curricular opportunities, and new structures for collaboration with the Superintendent and District as a whole.

Strategic Actions

2.1 Launch a two-way communications system with multilingual capabilities to improve communications with families and the community.

2.2 Update the District and school websites.

Why is this urgent? Survey data shows that stakeholders believe one of Dr. Watlington’s first priorities should be communication and engagement. During Listening and Learning sessions, families voiced that trying to communicate with the District can be frustrating because it is unclear who to contact about their concerns, and issues are not always addressed in a timely manner. When feedback is sought, it often feels performative or like “lip service” rather than a true opportunity to provide meaningful input. Stakeholders believe there is a lack of transparent communication, particularly around logistics, schedule changes, capital project planning, and work order processes, which makes planning difficult for families and school leaders. Similarly, members of the Violence Impacting Schools working group identified shortcomings in the way the District communicates about community safety and violent incidents. This results in a lack of trust between families and the District. District students and their families speak a variety of languages, and it is critical that systems of communication are accessible to all families in their preferred language.

Why these strategies? Clear and open communication is critical for establishing trusting relationships between families and schools, which fosters greater engagement. Students with engaged parents and guardians are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, and graduate and go on to postsecondary education. Connecting students, families, and schools with community assets can promote student achievement, expand access to health and wellness resources, and help break the cycle of poverty.

Aligns with: Guardrail 3; Transition Team Recommendations

2.3 Launch a Superintendent’s parent and guardian advisory group that reflects our diversity, including parents and guardians of underserved students, students with disabilities, and English Learners.

2.4 Launch a Superintendent’s teacher advisory group.

2.5 Launch a Superintendent’s principal advisory group.

2.6 Relaunch a Superintendent’s student advisory group.

2.7 Launch a Superintendent’s advisory group with external stakeholders and community partners.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, parents and guardians, teachers, principals, students, and community members shared that they want more opportunities to have their opinions and experiences heard and considered in decision-making. Stakeholders also feel that decisions made by the Central Office sometimes feel abrupt and arbitrary, and that decisions should be made based on shared values. On the annual survey, only 11% of teachers strongly agreed that they feel respected by the District, and only 22% of principals strongly agreed that they feel respected by the District

Why these strategies? A collaborative decision-making model means that families, students, and school staff are included in the decision-making processes that directly impact their work and learning. This structure enhances the ability of schools to respond to problems and opportunities, improves relationships between leaders and key stakeholders, increases satisfaction and morale, facilitates better decision making by eliciting more viewpoints, and helps reduce stress and burnout. School-community partnerships can enable the expansion of services and resources for students, and are often most effective when community partners and districts have a strong relationship based on collaboration and respect.

Aligns with: Guardrail 3; Transition Team Recommendations

2.8 Create a database of all District partnerships, their alignment to the strategic plan, and impact.

Why is this urgent? Schools reported a total of 1,646 external support programs in 2019-20, provided by 1,050 organizations, with an average of 15 programs per school. The data suggests that current school partnerships are not equitably distributed among schools, nor are they always meeting the critical needs of schools. During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders discussed how community partnerships are a key way to bring in more resources; however, there is a need to improve coordination between the District, schools, and community partners. Additionally, stakeholders shared significant concerns about managing partnerships and explained that they do not have the capacity to manage all the available partnerships that could benefit their students and communities. Thirty-two schools reported that they had a partnerships coordinator. School leaders reported that limited staff capacity to establish and/or coordinate partner programs was a challenge to partnership development.

Why this strategy? Improving schools involves addressing the social and economic challenges that students and their families face. Building partnerships strengthens the capacity of schools to respond to student needs. Partnerships can enhance students’ social, emotional, and intellectual development. However, with limited time and numerous needs, it is the responsibility of the District to ensure that partnerships are properly aligned to the needs of schools and they are meeting the agreed upon expectations in terms of operations and outcomes.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

2.9 Relaunch Parent University to provide resources and support to families and community.

Why is this urgent? Census data shows that almost 22% of Philadelphians are living below the poverty line, 13% do not have a high school diploma, and only 33% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. This speaks to the need for adult education programming. Additionally, Listening and Learning feedback highlighted that there is a lack of trust between families and the District; engaging parents and guardians in workshops and training is a way to increase engagement, which can help to build positive relationships and repair trust.

Why this strategy? Participation in adult education programming increases access to the knowledge and skills that enable social mobility and increased democratic participation. Furthermore, a study found that districts play an important role in providing adult education, as they are responsible for providing over half of the adult education programming available across the nation. Not only can participating in a parent university have positive outcomes for parents and guardians, but research has found that students can benefit when their parents and guardians have the skills and resources to be engaged in their education.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 3

2.10 Establish a parent ambassador role (with paid stipends).

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, parents and guardians expressed how they have lost trust in the District and are often frustrated by the lack of communication about important aspects of their child’s education. Currently, schools share Family Liaisons that report to the Office of Family and Community Engagement. A way to improve positive relationships with parents and guardians and improve communication is to ensure that all schools have a dedicated liaison that can focus on a single school community and connect parents and guardians with their schools and the District.

Why this strategy? Parent ambassadors are members of the school community that have established relationships with parents and guardians. As part of a larger initiative to increase parent/guardian engagement with schools, parent ambassadors can be a way to build parent/guardian networks across school communities as well as spread the word about district-provided support and resources for parents and guardians.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1 and 3

2.11 Evaluate and replicate successful Community School models.

Why is this urgent? Community Schools provide resources that can address many of the barriers that our students and families face. In addition to providing students with wrap-around services, such as health centers, before and after school activities, and social and employment services, community schools serve to enrich students’ academic experiences by connecting them with mentoring, internships, and employment opportunities. These services were all mentioned as desirable to help meet the needs of our students and their families during Listening and Learning sessions.

Why this strategy? National research has shown that students who attend community schools have increased access to health care and higher graduation rates. A study of the Community School Initiative in Philadelphia during its first year found that there were some system level challenges to implementation at the school level, but stakeholders were satisfied with the initiative. Now that the Community School Initiative is in its sixth year, an updated evaluation would provide additional information about how community schools in Philadelphia are benefiting students and families, and how to replicate successful practices across community school sites.

Aligns with: All Goals, Guardrails 1 and 3

Partner with Families and Community

The chart below shows the School Year (SY) in which each Priority Area 2 Strategic Action will be implemented. The shaded areas for each Strategic Action represent when each action is planned to be in initial, full, and sustained implementation phases (see "Overview" section on p.5). The chart also shows the targeted Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 investments. In future years, the District will make investment decisions in the annual budgeting process.

Strategic Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	(SY 23-24)	(SY 24-25)	(SY 25-26)	(SY 26-27)	(SY 27-28)
2.1 Launch a two-way communications system with multilingual capabilities to improve communications with families and the community.	\$269,000				
2.2 Update the District and school websites.	No Additional Cost				
2.3 Launch a Superintendent’s parent and guardian advisory group that reflects our diversity by including parents and guardians of underserved students, students with disabilities, and English Learners.	\$25,000				
2.4 Launch a Superintendent’s teacher advisory group.	\$25,000				
2.5 Launch a Superintendent’s principal advisory group.	\$10,000				
2.6 Relaunch a Superintendent’s student advisory group.	\$25,000				
2.7 Launch a Superintendent’s advisory group with external stakeholders and community partners.	\$25,000				
2.8 Create a database of all District partnerships, their alignment to the strategic plan, and impact.					
2.9 Relaunch Parent University to provide resources and support to families and community.					
2.10 Establish a parent ambassador role (with paid stipends).					
2.11 Evaluate and replicate successful Community School models.					

Total Targeted FY 2024 Investments: \$0.4M

A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt under a black hoodie with a red hood and a green sleeve, is smiling and raising his right hand in a classroom. In the background, other students are seated at desks with laptops, and a teacher is partially visible. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a modern classroom environment.

PRIORITY AREA 3

Accelerate academic achievement

The District's primary goal is to provide the learning environments and supports necessary for all students to develop foundational academic skills and graduate college and career ready. We also know that high-quality, well-supported teachers and principals are imperative to our students' academic achievement, especially in math, English Language Arts, and science. As such, we must provide all schools with rigorous, standards-aligned, culturally relevant curricula and prepare all leaders and educators to use high-quality and inclusive instructional tools. Further, we can expand equitable access to various course offerings that fit our students' interests and goals, and create opportunities for students to receive additional support that meets their unique learning needs. When these Strategic Actions are implemented, all students will attend schools that enable them to succeed.

Strategic Actions

3.1 Inventory and improve access to high quality Pre-K programs for underserved populations.

Why is this urgent? According to Philadelphia's Commission on Universal Pre-Kindergarten only 1 in 3 of Philadelphia's three- and four-year olds has access to affordable, quality Pre-K. According to Pre-K for PA, 37% of eligible children in Philadelphia do not have access to high-quality, publicly funded Pre-K.

Why this strategy? Decades of research suggest several immediate benefits related to participation in high quality Pre-K, including increases in reading readiness and critical thinking, improved self-control and social skills, and higher classroom confidence. Recent research finds that students who participated in high quality Pre-K are more likely to enroll in advanced high school coursework, attend school regularly, and graduate on time. High quality Pre-K programs are defined by those that are aligned with rigorous and culturally appropriate learning standards, use a strong curriculum, employ highly trained teachers, provide adequate professional development, maintain a low child-staff ratio, screen and refer students for health related barriers to learning, and have a teacher observation and feedback system in place.

Aligns with: Goals 1-3

3.2 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for math (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

3.3 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for English Language Arts (ELA), with a focus on the Science of Reading (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

3.4 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for science (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).

Why is this urgent? In 2021-22, 17% of grade 3-12 students were proficient or advanced in math on the end-of-year state standardized assessments (PSSA Math and Keystone Algebra 1 exams); 36% of grade 3-12 students were proficient or advanced in ELA on the state end-of-year standardized assessments (PSSA ELA and Keystone Literature exams); and 33% of grade 4 and 8-12 students were proficient or advanced in science on the state end-of-year standardized assessments (PSSA Science and Keystone Biology exams). Teachers and school leaders have voiced that clear and consistent curricular resources are needed across schools. A curriculum audit also raised the need for a district-wide academic program that is aligned to Common Core standards and that is clearly based on a theory of action about how to improve student achievement.

Why these strategies? The use of a rigorous curriculum in combination with high quality materials can positively impact the quality of classroom instruction and student achievement.

Number competency in Kindergarten and first grade strongly and significantly predict later math achievement, and in some cases reading achievement, even when controlling for differences in other academic areas, behavior, cognitive development, family characteristics, and home environment. Students who are not skilled readers by the end of third grade are unlikely to graduate high school. Structured Literacy, based on the Science of Reading, is the most effective approach to teaching students to learn to read. Research suggests the majority of students in general education classrooms, and nearly all students with specialized needs, benefit from this approach to literacy. Research has shown that students who participate in design-based or project-based science curricular programming had more developed higher order thinking skills (critical thinking, problem solving, and application) and higher proficiency levels on the state science assessment than their peers who participated in traditional science courses. This strategy will ensure we use these research-based approaches to teaching math, reading, and science.

Aligns with: Goals 1-4; Transition Team Recommendations

3.5 Pilot evidence-based high impact tutoring in 6 to 8 schools.

Why is this urgent? The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on student achievement; one study estimates that students lost four months of learning by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Many District students are not meeting grade level standards, and require opportunities for accelerated learning to catch up.

Why this strategy? High impact tutoring can be effective at advancing student achievement when delivered with fidelity. Important aspects to consider when selecting a tutoring approach are when and how often the tutoring occurs, the quality of the materials used, and the extent to which tutors receive the necessary training and support. A study of Saga Education by the University of Chicago found that students who received tutoring with fidelity learned up to 2.5 years worth of math in one year.

Aligns with: Goals 1-3

3.6 Pilot a year-round and extended-day school calendar in up to 10 schools.

Why is this urgent? Many SDP students are not meeting grade level standards, and require opportunities for accelerated learning to catch up. During Listening and Learning sessions, students and teachers discussed wanting more opportunities to participate in programming before and after the traditional school day and highlighted the benefits of spending structured time with their peers beyond the hours of the current school day.

Why this strategy? Participating in high quality out-of-school time programming or extracurricular activities is tied to the improvement of a variety of outcomes for students, including math and reading achievement, physical and mental health, school attendance, promotion, graduation, college enrollment, and increased civic engagement. External research also suggests summer and after school programming can be effective in accelerating learning, provided there are small staff-to-student ratios, and adequate dosage in terms of hours. Incorporating these types of opportunities into the day-to-day school experience, rather than as “extra” or “additional” supports that students must sign up for, will likely result in similar positive effects for students.

In the United States, “year-round schooling” does not mean that students are in school for more days out of the year. Rather, the typical number of required school days, which is 180 in Pennsylvania, is spread out over the year so that there are more frequent, shorter breaks instead of having the extended summer break. For example, some schools in California that have a year-round-schooling model have a “60/20 calendar,” which means there are 60 days of instruction followed by 20 days of vacation.

Research on these types of year-round school models have found no positive effects on student achievement. Taken together, the research suggests that simply reallocating seat time across the year is not an adequate strategy for improving student achievement. Changes to the calendar must be paired with opportunities for students to participate in enriching and meaningful learning experiences that are not typically incorporated into the traditional school year due to time constraints.

Aligns with: Guardrail 2

3.7 Pilot learn to swim programs in different parts of the city in alignment with the curriculum.

Why is this urgent? Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages 5-14 in the United States. Black/African American and Latino urban youth report having poor swimming skills at higher rates than their white peers, putting them at greater risk of swimming related injury or death.

Why this strategy? When children and adults participate in swimming lessons, their risk of drowning is reduced.

Aligns with: Guardrails 1, 2, and 4

3.8 Audit and improve compliance with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and expand supports for English Learners.

Why is this urgent? The special education population in the District is large and diverse. In 2022-23, more than 18,000 students are receiving specialized education supports across nine different types of programs. The District also serves a large and diverse population of English Learners (EL). In 2022-23, there were more than 20,000 EL students with over 150 different home languages. This represents an increase of 3,000 ELs over the prior school year. The EL population includes students with specialized needs, including newcomers, students with limited or interrupted formal education, and long-term English Learners.

Why this strategy? The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act “...requires public school systems to develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. The specific special education and related services outlined in each IEP reflect the individualized needs of each student.” When districts are compliant with IEPs, students are receiving the appropriate supports for learning and are more likely to have improved outcomes. Similarly, when districts promote challenging activities with the right support for English Learners, students are more likely to achieve English proficiency and engage in grade level content.

Aligns with: All Goals; Transition Team Recommendations

3.9 Provide more support to teachers in the areas of content knowledge, student engagement, and culturally and linguistically relevant instructional practices.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders voiced that there is a need for more Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion professional development and training for teachers and staff. On the annual survey, 47% of teachers said that a lack of support for teaching special education students was a challenge; 38% said lack of support for teaching English Learners was a challenge; and 70% said range of student abilities was a challenge to student learning. On the annual survey, less than half (45%) of students said that their school meets their learning needs most or all of the time.

Why this strategy? Research shows that special populations of students are best served when teachers are engaged with professional development that “builds educator capacity to understand how gender, race, class, language, ethnicity, and ability differences are perceived and treated in the institution and influenced by implicit bias and micromessaging.” Additionally, teachers need support to use effective scaffolds to engage students in rigorous instruction; promote quality interactions, critical thinking, and discourse; use formative assessment to assess progress; and honor students' home languages, assets, and experiences in the classroom.

Aligns with: All Goals, Guardrail 4; Transition Team Recommendations

3.10 Establish a baseline standard for which courses, programs, academy models, and co-curricular opportunities will be offered in all schools (Elementary, Middle, and High School).

Why is this urgent? In Listening and Learning sessions, students voiced they would like access to a wider variety of courses and electives that are more aligned with their interests, are relevant to their lives, and prepare them for their future. On the annual survey, fewer than 4 in 10 students reported that they learn interesting things in their classes most or all of the time. Stakeholders also believe that art and music classes should be available to all students each year.

Additionally, feedback was given that rigorous academic courses should be offered in all schools, not just in criteria-based schools. In the 2021-22 school year, 61% of District high schools offered Advanced Placement (AP) courses, 11% offered International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, and 43% offered dual enrollment or college level courses. Many of the new Act 158 graduation pathways also depend on these opportunities. Currently, 34 out of 130 (26%) schools that serve 8th grade students offer Algebra 1. These schools are mostly concentrated in Center City and Northeast Philadelphia.

Why this strategy? The intensity and quality of a student's high school curriculum is a strong predictor of bachelor's degree completion. For example, a high score on the AP final or IB final exam in any AP or IB course, or participation in dual enrollment programming, is positively correlated with college enrollment and persistence rates. Research shows that students who enter career academies are more likely to earn a diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential, have more post-secondary opportunities, and higher wages than similar students who do not. Studies have also found that 9th Grade Academies can effectively support students' transition to, and successful completion of, 9th grade. Academies are most successful when they implement the following with fidelity: have a dedicated space in the school building for 9th grade students; have a dedicated 9th grade teaching staff with regularly scheduled time for collaboration; and a dedicated 9th grade administrator. While the District currently supports 9th Grade Academies, they are implemented with varying degrees of fidelity.

Art and music education are also key factors in the success of students in school and beyond. There is a positive relationship between involvement in the arts and increased positive non-academic behaviors, including participating in student government, volunteering, voting, decreased delinquency and drug use, increased self-esteem, and more positive interactions with peers and adults. There is some evidence that suggests that learning a language promotes knowledge acquisition for students. Additionally, since many of the most competitive colleges have language requirements, all schools should offer at least two years of a world language in addition to Spanish and French, languages that many District students already speak as their native or heritage language.

Algebra can be a “gatekeeper” to success in advanced math and in the job market, especially in STEM-related careers. However, it is important that this strategy be accompanied by increased rigor in pre-algebra courses, as research shows that if students enroll in Algebra I before they are ready, they may end up struggling with coursework, which can decrease the likelihood that they take higher level math.

Aligns with: All Goals, Guardrails 2 and 4; Transition Team Recommendations

3.11 Develop a project team to recommend optimal middle school design, programming, and facilities.

Why is this urgent? According to Listening and Learning sessions with school leaders, in some cases, middle grade students are not properly prepared for the transition to high school. Specifically, leaders discussed: 1) inadequate investment in pre-algebra and literacy skills during middle school years; 2) a lack of exposure to career paths, high school options, and postsecondary opportunities; and 3) a lack of focus on preparing students for the social and operational aspects of high school.

Why this strategy? Research suggests that there is no significant difference in the academic performance of middle school students who attend K-8 schools and those who attend true middle schools. However, students in middle grades are more likely to fall behind academically than students in younger grades and, if not properly identified and supported, risk being off track for high school graduation. What is most important is that the school is properly resourced to: 1) respond to the specific needs of middle school students, 2) deliver an instructional program that prepares students for the rigor of high school, and 3) develop a sense of attachment and belonging.

Aligns with: Goals 1, 3, and 4

3.12 Appoint an administrator to identify, audit, and improve access for underserved students to Career and Technical Education (CTE) and building trades programs across the city in alignment with regional workforce trends.

Why is this urgent? In the spring of 2022, less than half (43%) of students in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs passed their occupational competency tests, assessments of whether or not their skills meet industry standards. Performance varied across schools and CTE programs. However, during Listening and Learning sessions, teachers, community members, and parents and guardians said they would like to see more CTE and internship opportunities.

Why this strategy? Career and Technical Education (CTE) provides students opportunities to personalize their education based on their career interests and unique learning needs. Compared to non-CTE students, CTE students are likely to graduate from high school on time, enroll in postsecondary education within two years of their expected high school graduation year, and have higher median annual earnings. Research done in the District mirrors these findings: participation in CTE is associated with higher graduation rates for students. Also, CTE students who do not meet promotion requirements in grades 10 or 11 are more likely to catch back up if they continue their CTE program. The District recently partnered with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all CTE programs from January 2023 through July 2025. The evaluation will identify strengths, areas for improvement, and best practices for each CTE program, ensure they are in alignment with local and regional workforce demands, and replicate model programs throughout the District.

Aligns with: Goals 4 and 5; Transition Team Recommendations

3.13 Expand 9th Grade On-Track (Success Networks) to reduce dropouts and increase four year graduation rates.

Why is this urgent? In the spring of 2022, 29% of 9th grade students tested on grade level in ELA and 19% in math. Moreover, at the end of the 2021-22 school year, less than a third (27%) of 9th graders were firmly on track to graduate in four years. During Listening and Learning sessions, school leaders and students emphasized the importance of supporting students through the transition to high school so that they feel comfortable in a larger setting with new students and better understand academic expectations.

Why this strategy? School District of Philadelphia data consistently shows that 9th Grade On-Track status is linked with on-time graduation. Research from Chicago shows that 9th Grade Success Networks have increased on-time graduation rates. The District can leverage and expand a promising existing program, that is modeled off of the program in Chicago, and established through a partnership with the Neubauer Foundation.

Aligns with: Goal 4

3.14 Hire an administrator to better coordinate a District-wide dropout reduction strategy.

Why this is urgent: As of April 2023, over 3,600 District students in grades 7-12 dropped out of school. Not completing high school is associated with poor economic and health outcomes throughout life as well as an increased risk of incarceration.

Why this strategy? Many of the reasons associated with dropping out are complex and require the coordination of services across offices and providers. Supportive interventions, such as mentoring and restorative practices, can have a positive effect on attitudes about school for students, especially those who are transitioning back from a long-term placement. This is important because students returning from long-term placement are at a high risk of dropping out and benefit from intense levels of adult support and service coordination, which schools do not always have the capacity to provide.

Aligns with: Goal 4 and Guardrail 1

3.15 Launch a financial literacy module for all high schools.

Why is this urgent? Nearly 1 in 4 Philadelphians live below the poverty line and 12% live in deep poverty. Currently, 42 out of 73 District and Alternative schools serving students in grades 9-12 for which data is available offer a financial literacy course.

Why this strategy? Although the evidence is mixed, financial literacy courses may help students develop the knowledge and skills that support financial planning. Learning these skills can lead to greater financial independence, responsible decision-making, and active participation in the economy, ultimately contributing to students’ overall well-being and success. However, access to wealth, not poor financial management, is the primary challenge faced by people living in poverty. The literature cautions against financial literacy approaches that attribute poverty to a gap in financial knowledge and skills rather than a system that functions to maintain wealth inequality.

Aligns with: Goals 4 and 5

3.16 Implement quarterly benchmark assessments to provide teachers, parents and guardians, and students with information about learning progress.

Why is this urgent? The District currently does not have a standardized benchmark assessment program. Benchmark assessments can be useful for communicating expectations for learning, planning curriculum and instruction, monitoring and evaluating instructional and/or program effectiveness, and predicting future performance. In order for benchmark assessments to fulfill these purposes, they should be aligned to the curriculum, scope and sequence, and to the Common Core Standards.

Why this strategy? A balanced assessment system is one that is coherent, based on a theory of action, and efficient. When these criteria are met, districts can ensure that each assessment is necessary to gather data that will help meet classroom, school, and district-level goals, and that students are not over-assessed.

Aligns with: All Goals

3.17 Reorganize learning networks to place resources closer to families and communities and to improve student outcomes.

Why is this urgent? The District’s network structure is one of the key ways strategic support is disseminated to schools. School leaders vary greatly in their perception of District support. On the annual survey, 40% of school leaders reported that the District does not provide appropriate support for school leaders to act as talent managers; 51% reported that the District does not provide appropriate support to enable principals to act as instructional leaders; and 48% reported that the District does not provide appropriate instructional support for teachers.

Why this strategy? School networks should create the conditions to successfully support school leaders, centering schools as the unit of change. Effective network design can further a District’s theory of action by: 1) supporting the alignment and equitable distribution of resources to address the primary barriers to student achievement, and 2) supporting school leader autonomy and accountability. In order to achieve this ideal, the District needs to assess the assets and gaps of our current structure and reconceptualize how the network structure can best meet the needs of schools.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

3.18 Develop a “rounds model” for Central Office staff to visit schools, provide support, and debrief feedback.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, school-based staff members shared that they want Central Office leadership to spend more time visiting schools. Over 40% of Central Office staff members indicate that they spend a majority of their time working directly with other Central Office staff members. Though not surprising or inappropriate, this finding highlights the need to facilitate contact between Central Office and school-based staff.

Why this strategy? Central Office site visits are an effective way for program offices to familiarize themselves with the context of each school and gather school level feedback to inform decisions. This strategy is guided by the principle that Central Office staff members can best learn about the ways in which their programs, decisions, and processes impact schools by being present in schools, developing relationships with school-based staff members, and seeing what their guidance looks like in practice.

Aligns with: All Goals; Transition Team Recommendations

Accelerate Academic Achievement

The chart below shows the School Year (SY) in which each Priority Area 3 Strategic Action will be implemented. The shaded areas for each Strategic Action represent when each action is planned to be in initial, full, and sustained implementation phases (see "Overview" section on p.5). The chart also shows the targeted Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 investments. In future years, the District will make investment decisions in the annual budgeting process. For Strategic Actions 3.3 and 3.4, while materials were purchased in FY24, implementation will occur in subsequent years to ensure we have the necessary resources and engagement in place for successful adoption.

Strategic Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	(SY 23-24)	(SY 24-25)	(SY 25-26)	(SY 26-27)	(SY 27-28)
3.1 Inventory and improve access to high quality Pre-K programs for underserved populations.					
3.2 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for math (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).	\$26,666,667				
3.3 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for English Language Arts (ELA), with a focus on the Science of Reading (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).	\$21,666,667				
3.4 Purchase and implement standards-aligned core instructional resources for science (in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and parents and guardians).	\$21,666,667				
3.5 Pilot evidence-based high impact tutoring in 6 to 8 schools.	\$2,031,398				
3.6 Pilot a year-round and extended-day school calendar in up to 10 schools.					
3.7 Pilot learn to swim programs in different parts of the city in alignment with the curriculum.					
3.8 Audit and improve compliance with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and expand supports for English Learners.					
3.9 Provide more support to teachers in the areas of content knowledge, student engagement, and culturally and linguistically relevant instructional practices.	\$2,230,000				
3.10 Establish a baseline standard for which courses, programs, academy models, and co-curricular opportunities will be offered in all schools (elementary, middle, and high school).	\$150,000				
3.11 Develop a project team to recommend optimal middle school design, programming, and facilities.	\$150,000				
3.12 Appoint an administrator to identify, audit, and improve access for underserved students to Career and Technical Education (CTE) and building trades programs across the city in alignment with regional workforce trends.					
3.13 Expand 9th Grade On-Track (Success Networks) to reduce dropouts and increase four year graduation rates.	No Additional Cost				
3.14 Hire an administrator to better coordinate a District-wide dropout reduction strategy.	\$155,000				
3.15 Launch a financial literacy module for all high schools.					
3.16 Implement quarterly benchmark assessments to provide teachers, parents and guardians, and students with information about learning progress.					
3.17 Reorganize learning networks to place resources closer to families and communities and to improve student outcomes.					
3.18 Develop a "rounds model" for Central Office staff to visit schools, provide support, and debrief feedback.					

Total Targeted FY 2024 Investments: \$0.4M

PRIORITY AREA 4



Recruit and retain diverse and highly effective educators

Teachers and school leaders are the most important factor when it comes to student learning and academic growth. When educators feel supported, valued, and respected, they are more likely to stay in their roles and build strong relationships with students, which is paramount to student joy and academic achievement. Ensuring that all school staff members are well-trained and prepared for their roles allows our schools to prioritize high-quality teaching and learning, and cultivate environments that are supportive and nurturing to both students and staff.

This work requires intentional efforts to overhaul our recruitment strategies, reduce onboarding time for new hires, and implement plans to train and develop staff across all roles. Through these Strategic Actions, the District will intentionally hire and retain a workforce that reflects the demographics of our student populations, provide ongoing and relevant professional development, and create opportunities to attract and grow individuals who will serve our students well.

Strategic Actions

4.1 Establish instructional leadership teams (Principal, Assistant Principal, Climate Manager, Literacy and Math School-Based Teacher Leaders, and Special Education Compliance Monitor) at every school and provide them with training and resources.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders explained that good school leaders support collaboration and shared-decision making among school teams. The District's Employee Exit Survey data shows that half of teachers and instructional staff respondents who resigned for reasons under the District's control said that their supervisor's leadership/management style was a primary reason. Enhancing training and resources for school leaders and leadership teams is therefore key to ensuring that teachers feel well-supported.

Why this strategy? Support from school administration is one of the most important factors in teachers' decisions to stay in a school or in the profession, especially in urban, high-poverty public schools. When instructional decision-making is made by an instructional leadership team, rather than just a principal, school staff are more invested and committed to implementation. Developing principals who include teachers in decision-making and promote positive school climates may have an impact on retention.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.2 Pilot recruitment and retention incentives for teachers and principals to reduce vacancies in hard to staff schools.

4.3 Appoint an administrator to audit and analyze staffing data to make recommendations to address long-term District staffing needs.

4.4 Develop innovative retention approaches for hard to staff positions.

Why is this urgent? Decades of research have indicated that teacher quality is among the most critical factors in student learning, as students with more effective teachers have greater gains in test scores. The ability to recruit skilled teachers, assign them to appropriate and equitable roles, and retain the most effective among them is a major factor in school effectiveness. Nationally, the most effective and highly certified teachers are less likely to be teaching in schools that serve poor and minority students. This is also the case in the District, where higher percentages of teachers with emergency certifications are teaching in the schools with the lowest levels of academic achievement and highest levels of student need.

Why these strategies? A single approach is not sufficient to recruit and retain high quality teachers. Hiring and performance incentives must also be combined with strong school leadership, responsive and differentiated teacher development, and incorporating teacher feedback in decision-making.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.5 Recruit more Black and Latino male teachers and principals, in partnership with colleges, universities, the Center for Black Educator Development, and the Mayor's Commission on African American males to improve Black and Latino male student outcomes.

4.6 Develop a teacher preparation middle college high school in partnership with colleges, universities, and the Center for Black Educator Development.

4.7 Expand "Grow-Your-Own" programs for aspiring teachers and leaders with attention to historically underserved groups.

Why is this urgent? Teachers of color have been found to have a positive impact on learning gains and social-emotional well-being for students of color. However, nationally, while 53% of K-12 students are students of color, only about 20% of teachers are teachers of color. In the District, 61% of instructional staff are white compared to 14% of students.

Why these strategies? Increasing teacher diversity within a school may enhance the well-being of teachers of color, leading to improved satisfaction and reduced turnover. Experts have recommended partnering with local teacher preparation programs, including those at minority-serving institutions, to coordinate student teaching placements and vet candidates before they graduate, and there are successful models for these approaches for hiring teachers of color, such as in the state of Minnesota.

"Grow-your-own" programs have been found to be particularly effective in recruiting teachers of color. For example, alternative teacher and principal preparation programs have proven to successfully recruit and retain teachers and leaders of color. Overall, The National Center for Educational Evaluation (NCEE) found that the percentage of teachers from Teacher Residency Programs (TRP) who remained in their starting district was 15 percentage points higher compared to non-TRP teachers. Additionally, a national study shows that the first-year attrition rate for teachers recruited from paraeducator career ladder programs is considerably lower than attrition rates of other first-year teachers.

The District’s paraprofessional to teacher pathway program has become a model program for supporting historically underrepresented groups of employees as they seek to become classroom educators in our District. There are currently 114 paraprofessionals participating in the pathway program, with more starting next school year. Sixteen are graduating and moving into teacher roles next school year. The rest are graduating between December 2023 and December 2024, and are preparing to become teachers of record in elementary PreK-4 or other professionals within the District.

The District leader residency programs have also proven successful. Since the launch of the Aspiring Principals’ Academy, the percentage of first year principals that stepped into the role from being a District assistant principal position grew from 21% in 2017-18 to 96% in 2021-22. In another program, 80% of Black men who participated were made eligible or have attained an assistant principal position for the 2023-24 school year.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.8 Develop an aligned coaching and feedback model for instructional staff.

Why is this urgent? On the 2021-22 annual survey, over half of teachers (54%) indicated that they rarely or never participate in professional development that involves observation and feedback. On the same survey, nearly one-third (30%) of school leaders reported that they spend five or fewer hours per week on instructional leadership activities that include observing classroom instruction and providing feedback.

Why this strategy? Professional development opportunities, especially those that are differentiated based on teacher needs and informed by principal observations, strongly influence teacher retention. Teacher coaching, especially coaching experiences that are tailored to the individual needs of teachers and local contexts of the schools where they work, have demonstrated positive effects on teaching and learning. Coaching cycles, including those that use recorded lessons, have also been shown to improve the achievement of students in the classrooms of novice teachers and those teachers who need to improve their practice.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.9 Provide ongoing professional development for non-instructional job roles.

Why is this urgent? Currently, the District employs 4,051 paraprofessionals, climate staff, and secretaries. These positions play a critical role in ensuring that the needs of our students and families are met. Moreover, 18% of the allotted positions remain vacant. Throughout Listening and Learning sessions, many staff members highlighted the need for additional development opportunities for non-instructional staff, particularly paraprofessionals and climate staff, to maximize their effectiveness with students and increase retention.

Why this strategy? Studies have found that paraprofessionals report the need for additional training in order to best support students they work with. When they receive ongoing appropriate development, paraprofessionals have positive effects on students, particularly in the areas of supporting students with disabilities and increasing reading achievement.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

4.10 Launch surveys that provide principals, Assistant Superintendents, and District leaders with feedback from their direct reports.

Why is this urgent? School principals are evaluated based on a self assessment and feedback from their supervisors. This feedback does not take into account the experience of teachers and additional stakeholders, which is essential to helping leaders develop a better understanding of the ways in which they can improve their practice and rethink their current behaviors. Feedback from teachers and stakeholders is also helpful in developing individualized support plans to speak to specific needs of school leaders as identified by those who they work with most. While the *Philly School Experience Survey* (PSES) for teachers includes a leadership topic, the feedback is not specific to individual leaders, there is no formal mechanism for school leaders to regularly review and reflect on this feedback. Central Office employees do not take the PSES and have no mechanism to provide feedback to their supervisors. The lack of evaluations for Central Office leaders has been highlighted by stakeholders as a major barrier to Central Office effectiveness.

Why this strategy? Schools with effective school leaders see higher teacher retention rates than those with less effective leaders. High performing teachers, in particular, are more likely to stay at a school with an effective school leader. One way to better understand school leader effectiveness is through a 360 feedback process, which includes the perceptions of teachers. Because teachers’ decisions to stay or leave a school is governed to a large extent by their relationship with their school leader, incorporating teacher perceptions in school leader evaluation systems can promote teacher retention. In regards to Central Office leadership, well designed surveys that solicit feedback about leaders in the workplace are useful tools for improving productivity and office culture.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails

Recruit and Retain Diverse and Highly Effective Educators

The chart below shows the School Year (SY) in which each Priority Area 4 Strategic Action will be implemented. The shaded areas for each Strategic Action represent when each action is planned to be in initial, full, and sustained implementation phases (see "Overview" section on p.5). The chart also shows the targeted Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 investments. In future years, the District will make investment decisions in the annual budgeting process. For Strategic Actions 4.8 and 4.9, initial investments are being made in FY24 to support the implementation planning process, which is critical to the successful adoption in subsequent years.

Strategic Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	(SY 23-24)	(SY 24-25)	(SY 25-26)	(SY 26-27)	(SY 27-28)
4.1 Establish instructional leadership teams (Principal, Assistant Principal, Climate Manager, Literacy and Math School-Based Teacher Leaders, and Special Education Compliance Monitor) at every school and provide them with training and resources.					
4.2 Pilot recruitment and retention incentives for teachers and principals to reduce vacancies in hard to staff schools.					
4.3 Appoint an administrator to audit and analyze staffing data to make recommendations to address long-term District staffing needs.	\$155,000				
4.4 Develop innovative retention approaches for hard to staff positions.					
4.5 Recruit more Black and Latino male teachers and principals in partnership with colleges, universities, the Center for Black Educator Development, and the Mayor’s Commission on African American males to improve Black and Latino male student outcomes.	No Additional Cost				
4.6 Develop a teacher preparation middle college high school in partnership with colleges, universities, and the Center for Black Educator Development.					
4.7 Expand “Grow-Your-Own” programs for aspiring teachers and leaders with attention to historically underserved groups.	\$212,200				
4.8 Develop an aligned coaching and feedback model for instructional staff.	\$212,200				
4.9 Provide ongoing professional development for non-instructional job roles.	\$207,200				
4.10 Launch surveys that provide principals, Assistant Superintendents, and District leaders with feedback from their direct reports.	\$150,000				

Total Targeted FY 2024 Investments: \$1.6M

PRIORITY AREA 5



Deliver efficient, high-quality, cost-effective operations

To achieve our goals as a District and to drive progress toward accelerated student achievement, we must have productive and equitable operations supported by high-functioning systems, clear prioritization, and strong accountability. It is essential that we cultivate a high-performing, collaborative, and results-oriented culture that supports school leadership teams as the unit of change. When budgeting, staffing, feedback cycles, and data systems are efficient, transparent, and aligned, all other aspects of the District can excel. These Strategic Actions address gaps in our current system and will enable the District to better provide direct support to schools, create a structured approach for implementing this Strategic Plan with fidelity, and support alignment through improved processes for hiring, budgeting, data use, and evaluations.

Strategic Actions

5.1 Establish a system-wide project management culture to improve organizational coherence, execute the strategic plan, and develop a collaborative, trusted, and results-oriented culture.

Why is this urgent? Selecting an evidence-based policy, practice, or intervention is only the first step toward achieving the intended outcomes. Identifying and executing a consistent implementation plan that incorporates feedback and buy-in from stakeholders across the organization is a critical next step in the process that currently needs improvement.

Why this strategy? Using implementation science and a continuous improvement cycle to coherently execute the actions of the strategic plan can improve the likelihood of implementing with fidelity and seeing the desired outcomes more quickly. This will also require a strong culture of collaborative project management to solve problems and promote a shared understanding of the actions needed and timelines that must be met to reach the desired outcomes.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

5.2 Use Council of the Great City Schools Central Office structure audit recommendations to enhance the District organizational structure.

Why is this urgent? Research suggests that the most critical action that districts can take to improve schools is to organize Central Office staff time and workflow around the needs of schools and school leaders. This requires all Central Office staff to understand how their work connects to creating the conditions necessary for effective teaching and learning. During the Listening and Learning Tour, District staff shared that Central Office departments are currently too siloed and disconnected. Offices too often do not seem to communicate or coordinate well with one another or with schools.

Why this strategy? The Council of the Great City Schools, an organization tasked with convening, guiding, and supporting improvement of 78 the nation's largest school districts, is completing an audit of the District's internal structure, capacity, and areas of focus. Results are forthcoming and will be used to guide next steps in improving the District's organizational structure in services of maximizing services to schools and students.

Aligns with: n/a

5.3 Implement a streamlined onboarding process to improve hiring timelines.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, leaders described a need to reexamine how we attract teachers and backfill positions with a greater sense of urgency. School leaders also said that staff burnout is the result of staff vacancies and substitute shortages, which creates additional challenges for the remaining teachers in the building.

Why this strategy? Our current hiring process requires a timeline that does not meet the urgent need of schools to be fully staffed and able to provide students with a quality education. The length of the hiring process and the resulting disruptions of late hiring may lead to hiring lower quality candidates, insufficient time to onboard and develop teachers, less effective teachers in high-need classrooms, and reductions in student achievement. Reducing the length of vacancies would also likely improve the attendance and retention of staff.

Aligns with: Transition Team Recommendations

5.4 Develop succession plans at all levels of the organization.

Why is this urgent? Turnover in senior leadership at the District is an ongoing concern and has increased in recent years. In addition to turnover, staff members may have long-term approved leave time, such as parental or medical leaves. Without a succession plan, the continuity of operations is disrupted because institutional knowledge and memory or authority to perform certain functions are not shared.

Why this strategy? Turnover in districts, especially turnover of school and district leaders, can negatively impact student outcomes. Succession planning is an important feature of organizational stability, particularly in high turnover sectors, and can promote a smooth transition of talent when necessary. Succession planning requires identifying talent who can step into critical roles immediately and ensuring they have the institutional knowledge and development necessary to do so efficiently and effectively. Yet, succession planning is not the norm in education, nor have many districts strategically embraced the concept. Without careful planning for transitions, districts fall into the trap of simply replacing key staff members without the essential overlap and mentoring necessary to ensure more immediate efficacy.

Aligns with: n/a

5.5 Develop a project team to audit and make recommendations for student remote learning and staff remote work.

Why is this urgent? Time is a precious resource. During Listening and Learning sessions, school leaders and students discussed the need for a more flexible approach to schooling that accommodates the differing needs of students, especially the need to complete high school while meeting competing economic demands. Leaders and students emphasized that a “one size fits all” approach to education is archaic and is not serving many students, instead forcing them to decide between work, family, and school obligations. Staff members shared similar needs for flexibility, noting that workplace flexibility is critical in attracting and retaining high quality Central Office employees, particularly those who could have workplace flexibility in similar positions in the private sector. Stakeholders also explained that allowing hybrid work ensures retention of employees with key institutional knowledge and demonstrates trust between employees.

Why this strategy? Schools across the country are exploring and experimenting with innovative approaches to teaching and learning, especially after extended periods of virtual education during the COVID-19 pandemic. These alternatives include competency-based education, experiential learning, online and blended learning, and flexible scheduling. All of these alternatives seek to prioritize the student experience, promote an individualized instructional approach, and focus on mastery of knowledge and skills rather than seat time. Although extensive research points to the ways in which remote work increases productivity and employee satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention, especially for women with children, particular challenges exist when applying this concept to the education sector. The District has been experimenting with hybrid options for Central Office staff members but has yet to step back and identify the best practices for making hybrid work most productive in the educational setting.

Aligns with: All Goals

5.6 Develop a performance evaluation system for all Central Office staff.

Why is this urgent? Stakeholders describe inconsistent effectiveness and competence across departments in Central Office, yet there is no evaluation system in place to determine to what extent Central Office staff members are meeting the expectations of their role in alignment with achieving our Goals and Guardrails.

Why this strategy? Central Office performance reviews can be an important way to “define expectations, enhance communication, and prioritize district goals.” Effective evaluation systems can also be useful tools for promoting continuous improvement.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

5.7 Launch an annual school leaders survey to provide feedback about Central Office operations.

Why is this urgent? According to the findings from Listening and Learning sessions, many aspects of Central Office operations were viewed as needing improvement. Respondents said that some departments have good leadership, delegate and prioritize well, and work well with schools. However, other departments were seen as needing better leadership or better staffing to function effectively.

Why this strategy? Districts with improved student outcomes have successfully pivoted Central Office duties from monitoring and compliance to actively and collaboratively supporting schools. One of the primary practices of districts who have made this change was the creation of a culture that establishes schools as the client of the central office and ensures that staff members have the mindsets, skills, and professional development to appropriately support schools.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

5.8 Extend the operating budget development timeline and evidence-based budgeting practices to improve collaboration and transparency.

Why is this urgent? During Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders described wanting more input on how resources are allocated, and more consistency and predictability in the budgeting process to support school planning. Currently, there is a mismatch between the timeline for budgeting and other critical processes such as finalizing the annual school plan.

Why this strategy? Research suggests that traditional budget processes do not ensure that funding decisions are aligned to implementing strategies that are most likely to move the needle on key performance indicators. An evidence-based budgeting process requires that funding requests be aligned to the organization’s mission and strategy. When possible, funding requests should also be supported by internal or external evidence of effectiveness.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

5.9 Review the school selection process annually and implement national best practices.

Why is this urgent? During the Listening and Learning sessions, stakeholders explained that they feel that the current school selection process is not equitable. School counselors, families, and students have expressed frustration navigating the application and enrollment process, and wish for better clarity and communication from the District.

Why this strategy? Over the past decade, large urban districts, including Boston, New York, and Chicago, have revisited and reformed the process by which they determine which students are eligible and admitted to criteria based high schools

Aligns with: Guardrail 4; Transition Team Recommendations

5.10 Recruit executive(s) on loan to advise the Superintendent and Chief Operating Officer on facility challenges and operational efficiency.

Why is this urgent? Facility challenges continue to plague the District; hundreds of District-operated school buildings have asbestos containing materials, many have notable lead issues, and over a hundred lack adequate air conditioning. These challenges often force schools to close early or entirely, impacting student and staff wellness and learning.

Why this strategy? Literature from other fields suggest that advisory boards can have positive impacts on organizations, especially when those selected to advise have industry experience that speaks to the specific needs of the organization. By engaging with industry leaders, organizations can build their understanding of areas that are critical to the success of their mission and avoid pitfalls by relying on the knowledge of experienced professionals. Additionally, workplace coaching can have positive impacts on the performance of an organization by impacting a leader’s knowledge and confidence.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails; Transition Team Recommendations

5.11 Provide the staffing, resources, and training necessary to meet school cleanliness standards.

Why is this urgent? On the annual survey, less than 30% of students indicated that their building was clean, and only 35% of students indicated that their building was in good condition. Findings from Listening and Learning sessions echoed concerns that schools are not clean and facilities are not properly maintained. Currently, 1 in 10 custodial positions is vacant.

Why this strategy? School cleanliness affects school climate, attendance, and achievement, and multiple studies have shown there is a direct connection between custodial staffing and building conditions. Maintaining environmentally safe and clean facilities also helps reduce student absences and teacher sick days.

Aligns with: Guardrail 1

5.12 Benchmark District performance against other large urban districts, utilizing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) in: Academics, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Information Technology, and Operations.

Why is this urgent? The role of the Central Office in ensuring that data is reliable and useful is imperative to the success of schools. Beyond collection and provision of data, effective data use by schools requires that the Central Office models best practices of data use, communicates expectations for and supports data use across the system, and convenes critical conversations that center on performance data. According to the annual survey, there is variation in the extent to which school leaders use data to make decisions.

Why this strategy? Developing a data strategy is an essential foundational activity. There is currently no indicator of how effectively Central Office staff are using data to make decisions, nor is there a clear expectation of how data is used across the Central Office. Research indicates that access to reliable data and professional development on the use of evidence-based decision making protocols, such as the Team Initiated Problem Solving process, can improve teams’ ability to use data effectively, implement actions and interventions aimed at areas of concern, and improve student outcomes. It is imperative to start with a focused set of Key Performance Indicators that we can benchmark against other districts nationally.

Aligns with: All Goals and Guardrails

Accelerate Academic Achievement

The chart below shows the School Year (SY) in which each Priority Area 5 Strategic Action will be implemented. The shaded areas for each Strategic Action represent when each action is planned to be in initial, full, and sustained implementation phases (see "Overview" section on p.5). The chart also shows the targeted Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 investments. In future years, the District will make investment decisions in the annual budgeting process.

Strategic Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	(SY 23-24)	(SY 24-25)	(SY 25-26)	(SY 26-27)	(SY 27-28)
5.1 Establish a system-wide project management culture to improve organizational coherence, execute the strategic plan, and develop a collaborative, trusted, and results-oriented culture.	\$750,000				
5.2 Use Council of the Great City Schools Central Office structure audit recommendations to enhance the District organizational structure.	No Additional Cost				
5.3 Implement a streamlined onboarding process to improve hiring timelines.	\$100,000				
5.4 Develop succession plans at all levels of the organization.					
5.5 Develop a project team to audit and make recommendations for student remote learning and staff remote work.	No Additional Cost				
5.6 Develop a performance evaluation system for all Central Office staff.	\$140,000				
5.7 Launch annual school leaders survey to provide feedback about Central Office operations.	\$15,000				
5.8 Extend the operating budget development timeline and evidence-based budgeting practices to improve collaboration and transparency.	No Additional Cost				
5.9 Review the school selection process annually and implement national best practices.	\$100,000				
5.10 Recruit executive(s) on loan to advise the Superintendent and Chief Operating Officer on facility challenges and operational efficiency.	No Additional Cost				
5.11 Provide the staffing, resources, and training necessary to meet school cleanliness standards.					
5.12 Benchmark District performance against other large urban districts, utilizing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) in: Academics, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Information Technology, and Operations.	No Additional Cost				

Total Targeted FY 2024 Investments: \$1.1M



Supporting Research for Priority Area 1: Improve safety and well-being (physical, social-emotional, and environmental)

1. Race equity and inclusion action guide: 7 steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion within your organization. (2014). Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF_EmbracingEquity7Steps-2014.pdf#page=4.
2. Guardrail 1: Every school will be a safe, welcoming, and healthy place where our students, staff, and community want to be and learn each day. This means that our schools will be: 1) environmentally safe and clean; and 2) spaces with inclusive climates that provide students with access to robust social, emotional, and mental health supports.
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11. Philadelphia Police Department. (n.d.). Crime Maps & Stats. <https://www.phillypolice.com/crime-maps-stats/>.
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13. Internal data, Qlik Philly School Experience Survey Application, Accessed May, 2023.
14. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). Safety. School Climate Improvement: Safety. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/safety>.
15. Ripski, M. B., & Gregory, A. (2009). Unfair, unsafe, and unwelcome: Do high school students' perceptions of unfairness, hostility, and victimization in school predict engagement and achievement? *Journal of School Violence*, 8(4), 355–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220903132755>.
16. Bradshaw, C. P., Cohen, J., Espelage, D. L., & Nation, M. (2021). Addressing school safety through comprehensive school climate approaches. *School Psychology Review*, 50(2-3), 221–236.
17. Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press.
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Jenny Bogoni, Executive Director, Read by 4th
Councilmember Kendra Brooks, Councilmember At-Large
Rep. Donna Bullock, State Representative
Morgan Cephas, Philadelphia House Delegation Chair
Donna Cooper, Executive Director, Children First
Becky Cornejo, Executive Director, Neubauer Family Foundation
Reverend Luis Cortés, Jr., Founder and CEO, Esperanza
Jannette Diaz, President/CEO of Congresso
Carolina DiGiorgio, Former CEO of Congresso
Justin Ennis, Executive Director, ASAP
Vanessa Garrett Harley, Esq., Deputy Mayor for the Office of Children and Families, City of Philadelphia
Senator Vincent Hughes, Senator
Andrea M. Kane, Ph.D., Professor of Practice, Education Leadership, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education
Lucy Kerman, PhD, Senior Advisor to the President, Drexel University
Joanna McClinton, State Representative
Maura McInerney, Legal Director, Education Law Center
Donald D Moore, Pastor Mount Carmel Baptist Church
Pedro A. Ramos, President & CEO, Philadelphia Foundation
Jennifer Rodriguez, President & CEO, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Nikil Saval, State Senator
Dr. David Thomas, Vice President, Community College of Philadelphia
Chase Trimmer, Philadelphia Director, Special Olympics Pennsylvania
Reverend Dr. Alyn E. Waller, Senior Pastor, Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church
Dr. Elliot Weinbaum, Chief Philanthropy Officer, William Penn Foundation

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Basic Education Funding Commission
Philadelphia
Thursday, September 14, 2023, 2:00 pm
School District of Philadelphia Administration Building
440 North Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19130

Dear Co-Chair Rep. Sturla, Co-Chair Sen. Phillips-Hill, and Commission Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Basic Education Funding Commission. I am Christopher Dormer, Superintendent of Schools of the Norristown Area School District in Montgomery County. I am also the President of the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools (PLUS), a caucus of PASA, the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, whose members represent 29 school districts across Pennsylvania, totalling nearly 300,000 students.

Norristown Area School District is located centrally in Montgomery County, sitting adjacent and to the northwest of Philadelphia in southeastern Pennsylvania. The Municipality of Norristown is the county seat of Montgomery County, and along with East Norriton Township and West Norriton Township, comprise the 15 square miles of our school district. We have 80,000 residents across all three municipalities, with approximately 9500 school aged children living within our borders. NASD will serve nearly 8000 students this year, with approximately 700 students attending charter and cyber charter schools and 800 students attending private and parochial schools. Our public school enrollment has grown significantly over the past decade, increasing from 7075 students in 2012-2013 to 7890 students last year, the 2022-2023 school year. Our district's demographics have significantly shifted over the last 10 years, with our White population decreasing by 52% to make up 11% of our current students, and our Hispanic/Latino population growing 72% to now make up 49% of our current enrollment. The number of English Learners has grown 104% over that same time period, and now make up nearly 20% of our total student enrollment. Over 1500 students, 19.8% of our students, require Special Education services. Of the students who attend NASD, over 75% are economically disadvantaged. We participate in the Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Breakfast and Lunch Program, meaning all students may receive free breakfast and free lunch daily. We are proud that we have grown our food service program and have over 60% of our students participating in breakfast and over 80% participating in lunch daily.

Norristown Area School District has been identified as one of the most underfunded school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. According to one set of estimates, NASD is the 28th most underfunded district in PA, by a minimum of \$13 million annually. Our adopted \$195 million budget anticipates 72% of revenues to come from local taxes, 24% from state subsidies, and approximately 4% from federal sources. Our homeowners have a high local tax effort as we lack the commercial base of many surrounding districts in Montgomery County. Most of our non-residential real estate is tax exempt, with a sizable number of local and county government buildings and non-profit health systems within our borders. Prior to the start of my

superintendency here in NASD in 2018, we went 10 consecutive years of raising taxes at or above the Act 1 index, reducing staffing and programs, and spending down fund balance. Over those 10 years when state subsidies were reduced, local property taxes were increased a total of 33%. In the five years I have been Superintendent here in Norristown, as state subsidies have significantly increased, we have raised taxes only at or below our Act 1 index twice and have afforded our taxpayers a 0% tax increase the last three years, where the state budget has included Level Up funding. In the first two years of my superintendency, we were able to maintain staffing levels with no additional cuts. In the last three budgets with significant state subsidy increases and Level Up funding, we have been able to return many positions that had been cut the prior decade and have begun to invest in positions we have never been able to afford before. All told, we have created 80 new staff positions in the last three budgets, including the hiring of seven reading specialists for the first time in our district. In this current budget, we specifically included the 10 additional English Language Development teachers to provide much needed services to our rapidly growing population of English Learners. The overall effect has been lower class sizes, more direct services to students, and increased support for teachers. The increases in state subsidy and the addition of Level Up funding has allowed us to significantly impact the delivery of teaching and learning. We have been able to implement and sustain a 1-1 technology initiative, ensuring that every student has a Chromebook, and that every household has reliable, high speed internet access to allow for technology to be a powerful tool for learning for all students both at school and at home. Last school year, we were able to invest in new mathematics instructional materials for all students Kindergarten through 12th grade to support the implementation of the new math curriculum. The new curriculum, better instructional materials, additional staff, and lower class sizes have had an immediate impact. In just one year, our elementary PSSA proficiency increased 10 percentage points from the prior year. Our middle school PSSA proficiency increased 5 percentage points from the prior year. We look forward to sustaining these gains as teaching continues to improve with these new materials. We are excited to implement a new English Language Arts curriculum with new materials this year, again afforded in this current budget through the increases we have received in state funding.

While we are proud of the progress we have made, we still lag below state averages in proficiency on state assessments and student achievement. We have seen the direct correlation that increased funding has had on increasing student achievement as we are able to provide them with equitable access to high quality teaching and learning and more researched based program materials in classes that are sized for teachers to personally impact each and every student. We are appreciative that this commission is looking to address the Commonwealth Court ruling that our current system for funding schools is unconstitutional. There are further investments needed for all students in Pennsylvania, and specifically here in Norristown. It begs the question - What does full funding look like? What would the impact be for a district like Norristown?

Fully funding our public schools would provide us the needed resources to meet the needs of each and every student through more personalized and individualized teaching and learning

experiences. Though we share many characteristics with other urban schools across Pennsylvania, we are uniquely different from the other 28 PLUS districts and other 499 districts across the state. Each of the nearly 8000 students in our district have unique strengths and learning needs. Full funding would provide us with the needed resources to meet each student with equity, rigor, and relevance. As just one example of what this looks like, I mentioned the over 1500 English Learner students in our district earlier in my testimony. I also mentioned that increases in state subsidy allowed us to add 10 ELD teaching positions this year. There are no caseload parameters for English Language Development teachers like there are for Special Education teachers. The addition of these 10 positions this year decreased the EL student to ELD teacher ratio in our district to 45-to-1. One teacher for every 45 students is not going to ensure that each EL student will meaningfully make annual growth, demonstrate proficiency, attain state standards, and meet our profile of a graduate, demonstrating they are a life ready citizen who can contribute to our community and this Commonwealth upon graduation. Given the majority of our English Learners are enrolling as Newcomers and Beginners with little to no English, we will need to continue to invest in this area to allow students the most support to make the greatest growth and progress. Full funding affords us the ability to continue to expand opportunities, differentiate learning, and develop more personalized programs for each and every student.

Full funding would allow us to modernize our facilities to provide next generation teaching and learning. Our newest school building, Whitehall Elementary School, opened in 1992. The next newest building, Norristown Area High School, will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year from when it opened its doors in the fall of 1973. Our last large scale renovation expanded capacity at East Norriton Middle School in 2006. We have recently engaged the Schrader Group to complete a feasibility study and help us develop a master facility plan. The first phase of their work was just returned to us and has identified over \$200 million in renovations and upgrades to our 13 buildings (12 schools and administration building) needed in the next 10 years. That figure does not include costs for any new buildings, of which we need at least consider one new middle school building due to age and cost of fully meeting ADA remediation. Because we have been an underfunded school district, the overwhelming majority of the construction and facilities work we have taken on with district funding in the last 10 years has been only that which is required to ensure that we can open each day - roofs, HVAC, doors, windows, kitchens and cafeterias. We did utilize significant amounts of our allocated ESSER funding on one time facility and operations upgrades, including the modernizing of HVAC equipment in all 13 buildings to include germ reducing UV and ionization technology, and the replacement of all faucets and toilet flush handles with touchless bathroom fixtures. Therefore, we have deferred a significant amount of maintenance and renovations as we have not had any reliable funding mechanism to complete much needed updates and modernization, short of incurring more debt or raising taxes even further. The lack of PlanCon has contributed to this significantly large need for future financial investment and scale of work to make our schools viable for the next generation of learners.

Full funding would allow us to provide property tax relief to our community. Though we have delivered three consecutive 0% tax increase budgets, we acknowledge that we need to reduce our millage rate, which is just short of 40 mills. We have many seniors in our community who have been forced out of their homes because they can no longer afford their school tax bill on a fixed income. The high tax rate also makes it difficult to attract new families to our community when you can buy a similar size house with half the tax bill just one school district over. Mandated costs that have driven up local property taxes - salaries, benefits, PSERS, Special Education costs, charter and cyber charter school payments - are not going away. Fully funding public education would allow us to reduce our millage and reduce zip code as a differentiator in education.

What does full funding mean for our students, staff, and families? It means opportunity. It means equity. It would provide us with the means to meet each and every student where they are and to provide them with a modern, personalized, and individualized educational program that prepares them for life and to be a contributing member of our community and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The recent increases in state funding have been put to good use in Norristown Area School District and the improved academic performance of students has started. I believe full funding affords us the opportunity to scale this to the entirety of our educational program for the benefit of all students, staff, families, and members of our great community.

Respectfully submitted,

Christopher Dormer
Superintendent of Schools
Norristown Area School District



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Jerry T. Jordan, President

Testimony Submission: Basic Education Funding Commission

September 14, 2023

On behalf of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, and the more than 13,000 members we represent, I am pleased to be here today to offer insight into the urgency of rectifying the decades-long disinvestment that has left our young people—a majority of whom are Black and Brown and experiencing poverty—shortchanged year after year.

While the focus of my testimony today is not on the ongoing facilities crisis per-se, I would be remiss not to discuss the impacts of last week’s heat wave on the first week of school. As you know, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of District schools were dismissed early, which was of course an immediate response to the situation before us: a heat wave. But the dismissals are actually emblematic of a [much larger crisis](#)¹, and that is the **ongoing refusal by our Commonwealth and quite frankly our country, to provide Black and Brown children the resources they need to thrive**. And that manifests itself in countless ways each day, including learning in buildings so old and with such deferred maintenance that their electrical systems could not even handle air conditioning units even if they were provided. *The buildings in which we expect our students to learn and our educators and staff to work would never be deemed acceptable in a wealthier, whiter school district.*

While the focus of my testimony today is on trauma and stress and its impact in and out of the classroom, the facilities crisis is an *egregious example* of how **our societal failures have perpetuated ongoing stress and trauma**. I have heard countless of our youth speak out about the message that the state of facilities imparts upon them: that no matter how much their teacher cares about them, *learning in a dilapidated school building gives them quite another message.*

And therein lies the crux of the impact of underfunding: students, families, and staff alike can do all the ‘right things’ to help our students grow and thrive. But when that growth is stymied by an ongoing refusal to invest in their futures, our young people suffer profoundly.

1

(2023, September 6). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/heatwave>

There are countless studies and reports on what the real life impacts of the ongoing underfunding has on our young people. I am providing a few research reports and recommendations with my testimony, and want to highlight this one quote, which comes from a [summary](#) of an Albert Shanker Institute study² titled *Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Opportunity*:

Breaking the cycle of segregation and K–12 funding inequity will require deliberate, large-scale interventions on both the housing and school finance sides of the equation. But the first steps are to acknowledge that racial/ethnic segregation and unequal educational opportunity are inextricably connected and to understand the history of how that came to be.

That is the solution. Investing in our young people and a deliberate, dedicated commitment to breaking down systems of oppression that have led us to this moment we are in today.

For decades, **our union has been at the forefront of the fight for equity and justice**. And recently, the AFT launched a campaign that identifies and makes key investments in *Real Solutions for Kids and Communities*. You'll see in some of the accompanying [documents](#)³⁴ that I've shared that resources are key. The AFT lays out a host of recommendations, including the expansion of the **community schools** model. And by resources, that means investing in human capital— it means additional school counselors, nurses, support staff; and it means lowering class size and increasing pay.

The last several years have been incredibly challenging, and the impact of many of the crises across this nation have been acutely felt by children of color and children experiencing poverty. And to navigate that trauma and stress, our young people need resources— resources that the government has historically refused to provide.

In an article on [Reimagining School Safety](#), authors Heather M. Reynolds and Ron Avi Astor note,

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial justice movements have made it very apparent that our current approaches to keeping students safe and healthy in schools need major restructuring

² Editors. (2022). What We're Reading: The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding. *American Educator*, 46(4), 40. <https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/wwr>

³

Weingarten, R. (2023). Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 64-70. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten>

⁴ Weingarten, R. (2023). Where We Stand: Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 1. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/wws>

and reform. We lack mental health supports in many schools at a time when students need them most.

They go on to note that “[r]ecent data show that 14 million students in the United States attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.” And they conclude that “[a] large body of research has demonstrated the positive impact of whole-school and whole-child prevention approaches that focus on developing and maintaining a welcoming and supportive climate and minimizing the removal of students from school.”⁵

This is what the AFT is talking about when they outline [What Kids Need](#).⁶⁷

And finally, but most certainly not least, I want to address the **crisis of gun violence** and the devastating impact it has had on our young people. Last [school year alone](#), thirty three of Philadelphia’s public school students were killed and 199 were shot.⁸ School communities endured shootings on or near school campuses, and communities across the city endured the ongoing and profound havoc this crisis wreaks. Many students come into school having endured the loss of a loved one.

And once again, the thrust of this crisis is **systems of disinvestment and oppression**. In a 2022 article for Center for American Progress, Marissa Edmund [clearly illustrates](#) what this means:

Notably, gun violence has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities and is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods that have historically been underresourced and racially segregated. This is due to a combination of weak gun laws; systemic racial inequities, including unequal access to safe housing and adequate educational and

5

Reynolds, H. M., & Astor, R. A. (2023). Reimagining School Safety. *American Educator*, 47(1), 22-25. https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor

⁶(2022, July 14). *FACT SHEET: ‘What Kids and Communities Need’ Campaign*. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2022/wkn_fact_sheet_2022_final.pdf

⁷ (n.d.). *‘What Kids and Communities Need’*. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.aft.org/whatkidsneed>

⁸(2023, August 31). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN JOINS CEASEFIREPA, CONGRESSWOMAN MARY GAY SCANLON, AND ADVOCACY PARTNERS TO CALL FOR ACTION ON GUN LEGISLATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/ceasefirepa>

*employment opportunities; and a history of disinvestment in public infrastructure and services in the communities of color most affected by gun violence.*⁹

And here's what we know: **there are solutions, and the solutions are resource dependent.** Who can argue that the crisis so devastatingly outlined by Edmund above, and so viscerally felt each day across our city, does not need to be addressed in a comprehensive and holistic way?

Everytown USA, a national gun safety advocacy organization, has [outlined](#), in the literature I have shared with you, both school and non-school based solutions, ranging from gun safety laws to school investments.¹⁰

There are no quick and easy 'fixes' for a system that has been perpetuated by decades of disinvestment. But here's what we know right now: the court has ruled with finality that **the system by which we fund public education in our Commonwealth is inequitable**, it is unconstitutional, and it must be fixed; and it **must be fixed by the legislative and executive branches.**

Every lawmaker in our Commonwealth owes it to our young people to once and for all address the disinvestment that caused then fourth grader **Chelsea Mungo** to write to **Senator Hughes** and tell him that her school felt like a 'junkyard.'¹¹ Shame on anyone who sees Chelsea's pleas and those of students before and after her and refuses to act with the urgency this crisis demands.

I thank everyone here for their attention to this crucial issue, and I **urge you to act swiftly.** There are a number of resources and studies that I have included with my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁹ Edmund, M. (2022). Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color. *Center for American Progress*.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gun-violence-disproportionately-and-overwhelmingly-hurts-communities-of-color/>

¹⁰ Editors. (2022). Keeping Students Safe from Gun Violence. *American Educator*, 46(4), 11-13.
<https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/everytown>

¹¹(n.d.). *The Children of Philadelphia Have Been Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis.* Senator Hughes. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from
<https://www.senatorhughes.com/the-children-of-philadelphia-have-been-attending-toxic-schools-for-years-this-is-a-national-crisis/>

Footnote 1

(2023, September 6). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/heatwave>

PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION

September 6, 2023

Amidst an ongoing heatwave that has prompted early dismissals of over 1/3 of District schools, PFT President Jerry T. Jordan issued the following statement:

PHILADELPHIA--"The ongoing and worsening impacts of the worldwide climate emergency, coupled with decades of disinvestment in our system of public education, have put an enormous strain on students and staff as they returned to school. This week's unbearable heat wave has prompted the closures of over 1/3 of District buildings, closures that will continue (with additional schools added) through the rest of the week.

"While members and students alike enthusiastically greeted each other on Tuesday, in too many locations, the excitement and anticipation of the year ahead was tempered by the oppressive heat that has had a real negative impact on student and staff well-being.

"Throughout the week, my team has been visiting schools as well as working internally to address literal hotspots. While we recognize that the District's early dismissal was warranted in those schools it named, there are a number of additional locations that continue to suffer from malfunctioning or minimally functioning air conditioning. Even in newer buildings, these challenges are very real. Additionally, while dismissal before the afternoon heat is prudent, the mornings in schools without air conditioning have been intolerable. For just one example, the heat at one school our team visited was unbearable on the second floor even before the early dismissal. We have received dozens upon dozens of calls from frustrated members over the past few days, and the conditions they report are simply unacceptable.

"Ultimately, the environments in which we expect students to learn, and educators and school staff to work, are deeply reflective of our societal priorities. When, for decades, we refuse to invest in a robust and well-funded system of public education -- *specifically Philadelphia's, where the majority of our students are Black and Brown and experiencing poverty*-- we end up with

devastating consequences. Nowhere has that been more clearly illustrated than in the ongoing facilities crisis that has left students and educators quite literally poisoned by their school buildings. And now, the lack of facilities modernization and electrical upgrades in too many locations has left many buildings unable to even support portable or window AC units.

"Further, the fact that we continue to shirk our obligation to truly address the climate crisis--and in fact, we have extremists who continue to peddle lies and conspiracies about even the existence of a very real emergency--is deeply disturbing and will have irreversible consequences.

"It is past time for Pennsylvania's legislative and executive branches to once and for all rectify the immoral, inequitable, and unconstitutional funding system that has wreaked havoc on too many lives. Both the legislative and executive branches have been charged with addressing the decades of neglect. And it is past time for the Republican extremists in Washington to stop playing deadly and devastating games, and get to work in making bold, sustainable, and ongoing investments in public school infrastructure and other critical initiatives.

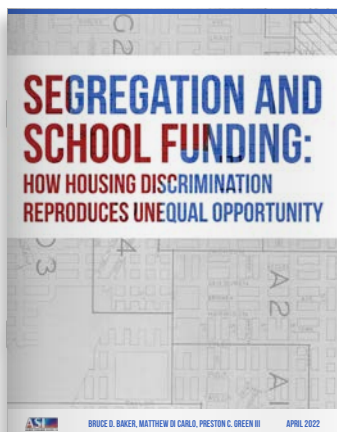
"I have been heartened by the incredible work of our members and our students to make this first week special, but *their resilience and fortitude in the face of a crisis such as this should not be necessary*. Every child and school staff member needs and deserves to learn and work in a safe and healthy school environment."

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Footnote 2

Editors. (2022). What We're Reading: The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding. *American Educator*, 46(4), 40. <https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/wwr>

The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding



A new report from the Albert Shanker Institute, *Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Opportunity*, lays out a clear path from redlining (which mandated housing segregation) to the creation of high-poverty Black and Hispanic communities where schools are underfunded—and students need educational enrichment. Here, we share a brief excerpt; for the full report, see shankerinstitute.org/segfunding.

—EDITORS

It is difficult to overstate the importance of segregation for race- and ethnicity-based school funding disparities in the United States. In many respects, unequal educational opportunity depends existentially on segregation.

Throughout most of the 20th century, white people decided where people of other races were allowed to live. An evolving array of strategies, from municipal laws to private contracts to federal aid programs, established and reinforced the systematic separation of households by race and ethnicity in the nation's burgeoning metropolitan areas. And they have been incredibly effective.

The effects of this segregation, past and present, are almost difficult to get one's head around; residence has dramatic and wide-ranging effects, direct and indirect, on virtually all important social and economic outcomes, including health, earnings, family status, social networks, and many others. School finance is but one of these areas, but it's an important one.

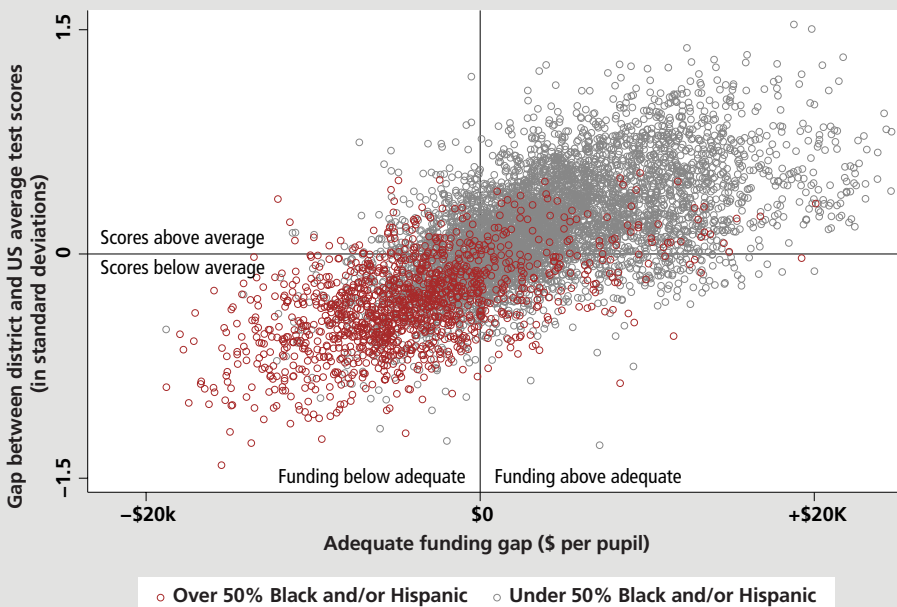
In the United States, school districts rely heavily on local property tax revenue, which means where one lives—particularly in which district—in no small part determines how well one's neighborhood's schools are funded. The mutually dependent relationship between economic and racial/ethnic segregation simultaneously depresses revenue and increases costs in racially isolated districts (because districts serving larger shares of high-needs students must invest more to achieve the same outcomes). This creates (and sustains) unequal educational opportunity—i.e., large gaps in the adequacy of school funding between students of different races and ethnicities living in the same metro area.

Across all US metropolitan districts, 89 percent of districts with Black and/or Hispanic student percentages at least 10 points higher than their metro areas (994 out of 1,116) receive less adequate funding than does their metro area overall. Nationally, a 10 percentage point increase in a district's Black and/or Hispanic student population above its metro area's overall Black and/or Hispanic percentage is associated with a decrease in relative funding adequacy of over \$1,500 per pupil.

It is, perhaps, more palatable to view unequal educational opportunity as a side effect of income and wealth segregation than it is to see it as the end result of racism and discrimination. Yet the reality is that economic segregation, while interdependent with racial/ethnic segregation today, has its roots in generations of institutional policies and practices to keep people separate based solely on their race or ethnicity. Racism built the machine, even if economic inequality helps keep it running now.

Breaking the cycle of segregation and K-12 funding inequity will require deliberate, large-scale interventions on both the housing and school finance sides of the equation. But the first steps are to acknowledge that racial/ethnic segregation and unequal educational opportunity are inextricably connected and to understand the history of how that came to be.

Student Outcome Gaps by Adequate Funding Gaps (US Metropolitan Districts), 2018



Nationally, we find that districts serving majority-Black and/or -Hispanic student populations are overwhelmingly likely to be funded inadequately and to have relatively poor student outcomes to match. (For details, see Figure 30 on page 78 of the report.)

Footnote 3

Weingarten, R. (2023). Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 64-70. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten>



Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

BACK TO SCHOOL is a time of hope and excitement for students, families, and educators. But this year, teachers across the country are wondering whether topics they teach and books they offer students will get caught up, baselessly, in the tempest of the culture wars. They might hear presidential hopefuls slander them as “groomers” who teach “filth.” These demagogues do nothing to help students in public schools—quite the contrary.

They are engaged in a coordinated attack on public schools (as I explain in my article on page 64) to starve public education and divert public school funding to private and religious schools through vouchers. Ninety percent of parents send their children to public schools, and the vast majority want public schools strengthened, not privatized.

What I’ve seen in classrooms all over the country as educators help their students recover and thrive, and what research has proven, together form a set of strategies and solutions that will help students and strengthen public education.

These strategies address students’ loneliness, learning loss, and literacy, and they are at the center of the AFT’s new \$5 million Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign. Our goals are to

- unlock the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader;
- ensure that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education;
- catalyze a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families;
- care for young people’s mental health and well-being, including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children; and
- fight for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

It starts with reading, the foundation for all academic learning. The AFT’s Reading Opens the World program has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we’re giving away 1 million more. Now we’re helping teachers develop their expertise in reading instruction through Reading Universe, a new online resource developed by working with real teachers in real classrooms. (For details on Reading Universe, see page 24.) And we’re reaching out to families with this issue of *American Educator*. We’re even printing 100,000 extra copies to give away at community events!

Another solution is experiential learning—learning by doing: like third-graders in Washington, DC, who role-play that they are officials addressing real issues affecting their city, and chemistry students in Cincinnati who get out of an escape room (their classroom) by solving puzzles that embed the content they just learned. Career and technical education is experiential learning at its best, and it prepares students not only for traditional trades programs, but also for careers in healthcare, information technology, and skilled manufacturing.

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and community schools help solve the challenges students and families confront today. Community schools wrap academics, healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, and much more around public schools—supports that students and families need to learn and live. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025. (To determine if your community is ready to launch and sustain community schools, see page 77.)



What I’ve seen in classrooms, and what research has proven, together form a set of solutions that will help students recover and thrive.

To further support young people’s well-being, we are working with parent and student groups to counter the harmful impacts of social media. In our new report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools* (available at go.aft.org/5wo), we call on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children—such as turning on the strongest safety features by default and implementing safeguards that deter students from overuse and protect students’ privacy.

Of course, we need appropriate funding for our public schools and the three R’s—educator recruitment, retention, and respect—so all students have the educators they need.

These solutions are worthy on their own; together, they are transformational. At the AFT, we are doing everything we can to scale and sustain them. And they should be a national priority, because we all want our young people to recover and thrive. □

Footnote 4

Weingarten, R. (2023). Where We Stand: Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 1. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/wws>

Real Solutions for Kids and Communities

Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy



By Randi Weingarten

I'm so glad we're back at our first in-person TEACH since 2019.* It's been a tough year. Actually, it's been several tough years. And how do you "reward" yourself during your time "off"? By signing up for some sizzling professional development in sweltering Washington, DC. That's who educators are. Working together to improve our craft, recharging through our connection and camaraderie. That's what keeps us going.

Same with me. After Mike Pompeo, the former secretary of state and CIA director, called me the most dangerous person in the world,¹ our members had my back. Teachers, being teachers, reached out, telling me others who were so labeled: Mother Jones, the most dangerous woman in America.² Walter Reuther, the most dangerous person in Detroit.³ Martin Luther King Jr., the most dangerous Black man in America.⁴ You get the point.

Why were they dangerous? They challenged deprivation and discrimination. They fought for a better life for their families

*To learn about the AFT's TEACH conference, visit aft.org/teach.

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her recent commendations include being named to Washingtonian's 2021 Most Influential People in Washington and City & State New York's 2021 New York City Labor Power 100.

and their communities. I'm honored to be in their courageous, righteous company. And that righteous company includes all of you—and teachers and school staff across the country. The malicious attacks and outright lies to which our members have been subjected are appalling. So why have Pompeo, the president he served, and others unleashed this vitriol against educators and their unions?

Remember the beginning of the pandemic? Parents showered praise on teachers and school staff. People saw just how essential the connection is between educators and public schools, and kids, families, and communities. And then the far right wing started their smears.

That's no accident. As extremists try to divide Americans from one another, they know that public schools unite us. As they wage culture wars in our schools, parents know we have children's best interests at heart. We teach. We help young people learn how to think critically—to discern fact from fiction, to be curious and tolerant, to learn the basics and discover their potential and passions.

That's why 90 percent of parents send their children to public schools. Most parents trust teachers, and they want public schools strengthened, not privatized.⁵

So why do extremists demonize, distort, and demagogue public education? And why don't they offer a single idea to strengthen public schools?

Because they don't want to *improve* public education. They want to *end* it. When they're not trying to slash public school funding, they are diverting it to private and religious schools through vouchers. That's despite the evidence that vouchers do not improve achievement. That voucher schools often discriminate

against children and families. And that vouchers siphon funds from already underfunded public schools.⁶

Never forget what Christopher Rufo, who invented the conflict over critical race theory, said: “To get universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.” Toward that end, he said, “you have to be ruthless and brutal.”⁷

Distrust. Ruthless. Brutal. That’s the playbook of fearmongers who call hardworking teachers “groomers” and say we teach “filth.”⁸ Of the culture warriors who censor honest history and ban books like *Autocrats*, and who pretend racism doesn’t exist. Of the bullies who target and torment LGBTQ kids and families. That’s the playbook of those who want to end public education as we know it.

And while the fearmongers are out of step with the vast majority of parents and the public, they are determined, well-funded, and, yes, ruthless.

Nowhere do you see this more than in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis hopes his anti-teacher “war on woke” will propel him to the White House. And it wasn’t enough for him to ban students from taking AP African American Studies. He’s whitewashing Black history with his new African American history standards that say enslaved people “developed skills” during slavery that “could be applied for their personal benefit.”⁹ It’s disgusting. And groups like Moms for Liberty, which was founded in Florida (and which has been labeled “extremist” by the Southern Poverty Law Center¹⁰), are attempting ideological takeovers of school boards. You may have heard of Shannon Rodriguez, a Hernando County school board member backed by Moms for Liberty, who targeted a teacher for showing a Disney movie with a gay character.¹¹ Well, Rodriguez also went after high school teacher Patti Greenwood for having stickers on her classroom door, including intertwined white and black hands wearing rainbow nail polish. Because like you, Patti wants all her students to feel safe, welcome, and respected. And Patti, who is the treasurer of her union, is here at TEACH with her local president, Lisa Masserio. Thank you for your courage and righteousness.

“Ruthless and brutal” is a thing in Washington as well. In April, some members of Congress called me to testify—a whole hearing

in my name.¹² Was it about how to help kids learn? No. About the resources schools need? Nope. About school infrastructure? Or civics? Or community schools? No, no, and no. They wanted to place blame for school closures during the pandemic—not on the pandemic itself or on officials who prioritized opening bars and gyms over schools. No. They wanted to make teachers, teachers unions, and me their political punching bag.

Never mind that in April 2020, a month after the pandemic shut down schools and most of society, the AFT released a comprehensive plan of action to reopen schools—safely.¹³ Safe for you and safe for kids. Never mind all the work you did during the pandemic to meet your students’ needs. Never mind that educators understood long before the pandemic the value of in-person teaching, learning, and connecting with students.

Frankly, if certain members of Congress didn’t interrupt as much as they did, I would have testified about everything we did during the pandemic—to reopen schools safely, to secure the support kids and families needed—and about what we all need to do to get it right if, God forbid, there is a next time.

But for a moment, let’s imagine I had a modicum of the power they ascribe to me. Here’s what I’d do: I would make sure that every school has enough counselors, nurses, librarians, therapists, teachers, bus drivers, and other support staff. That every kid has a rich curriculum that embeds joy and resilience—arts, sports, clubs, recess, field trips, summer camps, and a lot more. I’d abolish all unnecessary paperwork for teachers. There would be lower class sizes and less standardized testing—and it wouldn’t be high-stakes. The professionals who teach and support America’s children would be treated with the respect they deserve, with wages they and their families can live on comfortably. And, while we were at it, we’d do the same for every family in America.

Alas, I don’t possess those powers, but together *we do* have a superpower. Because in our union, in our democracy, we can achieve things together that are impossible alone. That is the essence of unionism: showing up when it counts; fighting, caring, and working together for the things that make life better—for our students, our families, our communities, and our society.



Host a Watch Party!

This article is based on Randi Weingarten’s speech at the AFT’s TEACH (Together Educating America’s Children) conference on July 21, 2023. She lays out five essential solutions for meeting kids’ needs, highlights educators leading the way, and shows how all of us can join the fight. Hosting a watch party is a great first step in joining the AFT’s Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

—EDITORS



Five Essential Solutions

The responsibilities placed on your shoulders probably feel impossible at times. It can be daunting to help even one child who is suffering with anxiety or who is struggling academically. Yet you give your all to meet the needs of *all* your students, too often without the supports you and your students need and deserve.

Even before the pandemic, the United States had a youth mental health crisis¹⁴ and a crisis of lagging student achievement, particularly for marginalized youth.¹⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have exacerbated loneliness, learning loss, absenteeism, and so much more.

No one has to cite drops in test scores or attendance for us to know that students aren't recovering as fast as we'd like and that many of our kids are not all right. Educators and families know the condition of our children better than anyone—how they are struggling and what they need.

Helping kids recover and thrive is your priority. I've seen it—in classrooms from coast to coast and in between; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. What I have witnessed, what educators like you have shown me, what research has proven—all form a set of strategies and solutions that have helped and will help young people and strengthen public education. But it must be a national priority. And it must be our union's priority.

Too often, things get siloed in education. We'll work on academic learning here and social and life skills there. But brain science—and common sense—show that physical health, emotional wellness, and feelings of connection all influence academic learning—in fact, all learning.¹⁶ Our brains aren't siloed, and our schools shouldn't be either.

How can we do this? By committing to these essential solutions that meet kids' needs:

- Unlocking the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader.
- Ensuring that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education.
- Caring for young people's mental health and well-being,

including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children.

- Catalyzing a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families.
- And, of course, fighting for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

These are the foundations of the \$5 million, yearlong campaign the AFT is launching today, Real Solutions for Kids and Communities. These strategies work. And we will do everything we can to scale and sustain them: visiting classrooms and communities across the country, lifting up these solutions and the countless other things you are doing to help kids succeed.

Reading

It starts with *reading*: the foundation for all academic learning.

The AFT's Reading Opens the World program, in partnership with First Book, has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we're well on our way to giving away 1 million more. Sharing the joy of reading when kids choose their own books at these events is one of the best endorphin rushes you could have. The wonder in their eyes; the smiles on their faces.

But getting books in young people's hands is just the start. The ability to read is a fundamental right, and teaching children to read is the most fundamental responsibility of schooling.

The AFT has been advocating for an evidence-based approach to reading instruction for decades. That science of reading points to a systematic approach that includes phonics instruction along with giving students plenty of opportunities to read high-quality books, develop their background knowledge, and build their vocabulary.¹⁷

These principles must be included in teacher preparation programs, in curriculums, and in high-quality professional development.

And while some districts continue to ignore the science of reading or think tutoring alone will boost literacy, the good (and surprising) news is that our country is on the cusp of the most comprehensive approach to reading ever. New research from the Albert Shanker Institute evaluating state reading reform laws shows more consensus in this evidence-based approach than we have ever seen.¹⁸ School districts such as New York City¹⁹ and Detroit²⁰ are pledging to teach reading using this evidence-based approach.

This is good news, but teachers need to be supported in this work. This change won't happen overnight. The AFT is committed to fighting for and providing opportunities for teachers to learn, practice, and be mentored in evidence-based approaches. We're also investing in an exciting new project, Reading Universe, led by one of our longtime partners, WETA, along with First Book and the Barksdale Reading Institute, whose work in Mississippi* has moved fourth-grade reading achievement from the bottom of the country up to the national average.²¹

Reading Universe is an online, step-by-step pathway for teachers, paraprofessionals, and reading coaches to learn more

*For details on Reading Universe and how Mississippi is increasing reading achievement, see page 24.

about evidence-based reading instruction and then use it in their classrooms to complement any curriculum. It offers videos filmed in real classrooms, with real kids, in diverse settings around the country. There will be a focus on serving English learners, students with dyslexia or other learning issues, and students from marginalized communities.

Reading Universe will offer educators everywhere access to the strategies and skills that enable them to help kids be confident and joyful readers, regardless of the curriculum a district or school requires. And it's been built from the start with a cadre of skilled teachers and researchers.

I am thrilled to announce the launch of this powerful tool today. And to announce that it's free—yes, free—and available online to every educator, because all students need and deserve high-quality literacy instruction.

But reading, as important as it is, is just one part of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

Helping kids recover and thrive is our priority.

Experiential Learning

We know that many kids are disengaged or don't want to go to school at all. Honestly, I get it. There are a lot of school experiences that don't interest or inspire young people.

But not in Raphael Bonhomme's classroom. Raphael teaches third grade at School Within School on Capitol Hill, in the District of Columbia, and he is an AFT Civics Design Team member.

Raphael's students learn about local government by role-playing that they are DC Council members, addressing real issues affecting their city. At the end of third grade, his students create DC tour companies, researching the city's historical sites. They then role-play how they would attract people to take their tour.

Denise Pfeiffer, a high school chemistry teacher in Cincinnati, creates escape rooms in her classroom. Her students work in pairs, and, to get out, they have to solve puzzles that embed the content they have learned.

These are examples of *experiential learning*. And many of us do this. I had students in my Street Law classes at Clara Barton High School role-play housing court mock trials. And in my AP government course, my students acted out mock appellate court arguments.

Now, in the age of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT, this type of learning is essential to being able to analyze information, think critically, apply knowledge, and discern fact from fiction. Experiential learning engages students in deeper learning, provides them with real-world, real-life skills, and boosts academic achievement.²²

Career and technical education (CTE) is project-based experiential learning at its best. It is a 21st-century game changer. CTE prepares students not only for traditional trades programs like welding, plumbing, carpentry, and auto repair, but also for careers in healthcare, culinary arts, advanced manufacturing and aeronautics, information technology, graphic design, and so much more. And it works. Ninety-four percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 72 percent of them go on to college.²³

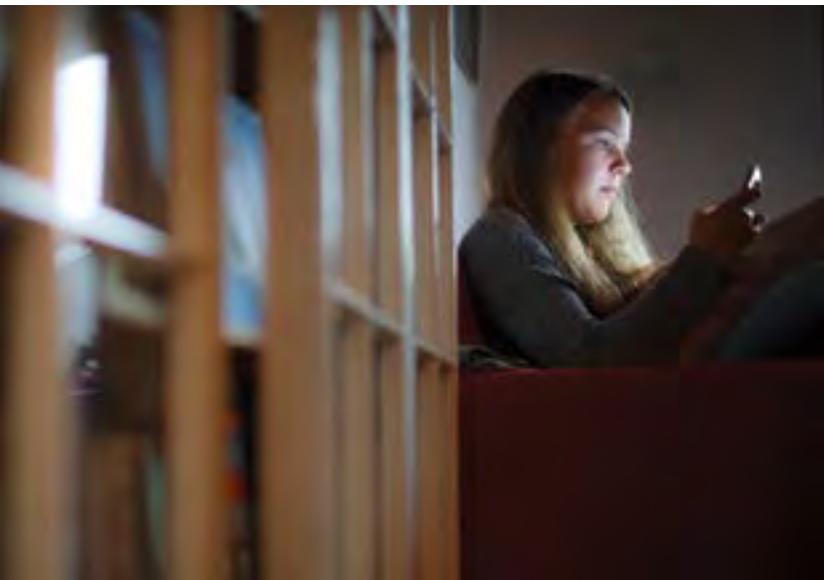
In June, the AFT's CTE committee visited Lynn Vocational and Technical High School in Massachusetts. Students in the culinary program catered a delicious sit-down breakfast for our group of 40 visitors. We saw beautiful porch swings and sheds handcrafted by carpentry students. Students demonstrated their knowledge of plumbing and pipefitting. These young people graduate from high school with lots of options and opportunities.

In Syracuse, New York, a new plant being built by the semiconductor manufacturer Micron will create tens of thousands of jobs. At the AFT's initiative, Micron is partnering with school systems and teachers unions in New York to develop a curriculum framework that prepares high school students for engineering and technical careers. And we are working with the region's school systems to develop the teacher training necessary to teach this curriculum.

In rural southeast Ohio, again with the help of our union, schools in New Lexington have expanded CTE to include everything from robotics for third-graders to a partnership with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to train high school students for in-demand electrical jobs. Their graduation rate has shot up to 97 percent, and 30 percent of students earn college credits before high school graduation.

By being intentional about this—starting by high school, identifying school-to-career pathways, partnering with employers, creating paid internships, and offering industry-approved credentials or college credit—we can set young people on a path to a career or higher education, or both, right out of high school.





UTE GRABOVSKY / GETTY IMAGES

Preparing kids for college, career, civic participation, and life— isn't that the job of public schools?

If you have been empowered to engage in experiential learning with your students, you know how transformational it is. And you know that standardized test-based accountability systems can't capture the richness of experiential learning. As I have advocated repeatedly, we need to reimagine our accountability systems to assess what is needed in today's world, not yesterday's, such as the ability to communicate, work cooperatively, think critically, troubleshoot, and be creative. These are the lifelong skills that will enable students to thrive no matter what the future holds, no matter what the next version of AI brings, no matter the challenges they may face.

Community Schools

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and *community schools* help solve the challenges students and families confront today.*

Hunger, housing insecurity, trauma, physical health problems—even the lack of clean clothing—all negatively affect children's ability to learn. And now, after the isolation, stress, and, for many young people, loss of loved ones during the pandemic, their needs are even greater.

Educators are heroic. You do it all in your classrooms. Who here keeps snacks for when students are hungry? Who's had to interrupt your teaching to comfort a student who is distraught? Who's had students with a health or family problem that interfered with their learning? How about this: Who would welcome having support services in your school that meet kids' needs and allow you to focus on teaching? That's what community schools do.

Community schools can wrap so much around public schools—healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, child care, enrichment, tutoring, and sports and afterschool activities. It all supports what students and families need to learn, live, and thrive. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities.

*Turn to page 77 to learn more about community schools.

United Community Schools, a network of community schools in New York City that has expanded into Albany, has higher rates of vulnerable students than other public schools. Yet they perform better on measures like college readiness and the progress of English language learners and students with disabilities.²⁴

Likewise with San Francisco's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School (MLK). Prior to becoming a community school in 2015, MLK struggled with enrollment and academics, and educators were burned out. Now, with support from 40 community partners, there have been significant increases in math and reading scores at MLK, and teachers are choosing to stay. And United Educators of San Francisco saw the possibilities and worked with a community coalition to pass Proposition G last November, which expands this community school model.

When I advocated for a broad expansion of community schools in my first speech as AFT president in 2008, our North Star was Cincinnati. Today, there is a constellation of community schools. We're in Albuquerque and Albany, El Paso and Pittsburgh, Masena and McDowell. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025.

We are fighting to make community schools the norm, not the exception. And we have allies in this fight. California is investing an additional \$4 billion in community schools. President Joe Biden doubled federal funding for community schools. And Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson—the Chicago Teachers Union's and AFT's own—is dramatically expanding the district's community schools program, with the goal of all district schools functioning as community hubs through community partnerships.

Mental Health and Well-Being

While community schools can provide a safe and supportive physical environment for young people, there is an environment that threatens their physical and emotional well-being—social media and the online world.

Even before the pandemic, many experts connected the *harmful impacts of social media* and the nefarious practices of social media companies to the youth mental health crisis.²⁵

Social media can have benefits, but research has shown that teens who spend more than three hours per day on social media are at double the risk for experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.²⁶ Social media can increase bullying and diminish people's ability to interact face to face, and it has been tied to eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of being less than or left out.²⁷ Too many children have an addictive relationship with social media that families can't fix on their own.

Schools are also grappling with an increase in dangerous and disruptive behavior linked to social media, such as viral challenges. Challenges to destroy school property, or to slap a teacher, or to "swat"—the one that encourages students to report hoax shootings—are dangerous and traumatic for students, staff, and families.

And all of these detract from the primary mission of our schools, which is to protect and educate our children.

So as schools are struggling to hire mental health professionals and to provide training to teachers to better support students with their mental health, we are calling on social media companies to step up.

Social media companies have shirked their responsibility to protect kids. Facebook's own research showed how their algorithms harm users, especially adolescent girls. Did they change their practices to protect kids based on what they knew? No—they hid it.

These companies must protect young people, not prey on them for profit. It's not enough to issue press releases promising to "improve the viewing experience" when "Recommended for You" feeds send content that glorifies eating disorders, or to settle lawsuits with families grieving for children who received unsolicited videos about suicide.²⁸

Educators and families know our children are struggling and what they need.

The AFT is taking action. Working with ParentsTogether (a platform of 2.5 million parents), Fairplay for Kids, Design It for Us, and the American Psychological Association, we are calling on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children. Our report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools*, calls for the following safeguards: (1) turn on the strongest safety features by default; (2) make changes that deter students from overuse and addictive behavior; (3) protect their privacy; (4) shield them from risky algorithms; and (5) directly engage and work with schools and families. Social media platforms could implement these today.²⁹

Our coalition of students, educators, and parents won't let up until they do.

I'm glad ParentsTogether is with us today. And I'm glad many students are here, including 15-year-old Ryan Lomber from Oregon. Ryan makes and sells art to fund her program to make everyone in her school community feel welcome and to bridge differences between people.³⁰

When we join in common cause and common purpose with parents, educators, students, employers, faith leaders, and the broader community, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals. That is why fearmongers and demagogues try so hard to divide. It takes work to create trust. But it's transformational. Look at New Haven, Connecticut, where educators and families went to the state capital together to fight back against school privatization and for much-needed education investments. And the Michigan Education Justice Coalition, which has trained thousands of people to get involved in their school boards. Thousands of parents and educators from Yonkers, New York, to the ABC Unified School District in California, from Houston to Detroit, have fought for the schools our kids need.

And, of course, we must continue to work collectively to combat the leading cause of death for children in the United States:

firearms.³¹ Parties, parades, concerts, and classrooms—all places where our children should feel safe; all places that have been devastated by gun violence. Here's an idea: ban assault weapons, not books.

Educators, Staff, and Resources

What I'm about to say is obvious to all of you, but we have to fight for it. We need *appropriate funding for our public schools* and the three R's: *educator recruitment, retention, and respect*.

The report of the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force that we released last year is chock-full of solutions: family-sustaining wages; time to plan and prepare for classes, collaborate with colleagues, and participate in meaningful professional development; and the power to make day-to-day classroom decisions.³²

It's easy to see what's needed. What is hard is making it happen.

But we have, in recent collective bargaining contracts. United Teachers Los Angeles' new contract includes higher pay and smaller class sizes, more funding for community schools, and support for vulnerable students. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers' new contract increases pay and provides more ways for teachers to engage with parents and to support multilingual learners and students with disabilities. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators won an agreement for all schools to have mental health support teams. And the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers' contract requires an Instructional Leadership Team in every school that puts decisions about school operations and improvement in the hands of those closest to students.

We have allies in this fight, including the fight to pay educators more. New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham enacted a \$10,000 raise for teachers. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Rep. Frederica Wilson of Florida proposed bills that would raise teacher salaries. And President Biden called on lawmakers to give public school teachers a raise during his State of the Union address.

In years past, when I and others advocated for higher pay for teachers and *adequate and equitable education funding*, the





right wing would fire back, “money doesn’t matter.” But evidence matters, and I admire those willing to follow it, like researcher Eric Hanushek, who argued for decades that more funding didn’t lead to better educational outcomes. He has made a stunning turnaround. Hanushek has reviewed the most rigorous research on education funding and finds what you and I know—that money does, in fact, matter.³³ As the Albert Shanker Institute documented a decade ago, research shows that when schools get more money, student achievement goes up and students tend to stay in school longer.³⁴

But others still operate ideologically. As we speak, House Republicans are trying to cut billions in funding for public education. This will hurt preschoolers, English language learners, and millions of children from low-income families because these lawmakers propose *slashing Title I by 80 percent*. It’s inexcusable. (I am so grateful to all of the TEACH participants who lobbied on Capitol Hill to turn this around.)

Public education must be supported, not stripped. And thankfully we have allies here too. President Biden’s budgets reflect his unwavering support for public schools. Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a budget last month with an additional \$570 million for K–12 education. In Minnesota, Governor Tim Walz approved \$2.2 billion in new K–12 spending over the next two years. And in Wisconsin, Republican politicians are reeling over the clever way Governor Tony Evers increased per-pupil spending *for the next 400 years*. Elections matter.

Together, These Real Solutions Will Succeed

The solutions I have outlined are worthy on their own. Together, they are transformational: Reading truly opens the world. Community schools help students and their families thrive. Experiential learning prepares young people to seize the opportunities in our changing economy. Together, everyone in students’ circle of care must work to address learning loss, loneliness, culture wars,

gun violence, and unrestrained social media. Educators must be supported, respected, and compensated befitting their essential role. And public schools must be adequately funded.

Those are the elements of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign that we are launching today.

Look, we know how to run contract campaigns and political campaigns. Let’s put that same energy and expertise into this campaign to win these solutions for our kids, for educators like you, for our public schools, and for our democracy. Because without public schooling, and the pluralism and opportunity that arise from it, there can be no broad-based, multiracial democracy.

We need you to tell your stories and showcase the great things happening in your classrooms.

We want to lift up the teaching and learning happening all over. We want to lift up these foundational strategies and solutions. We need to embed them into collective bargaining and enshrine them into district policies and state laws so they can be scaled and sustained.

And I bet, as we address hard issues like loneliness, literacy, and learning loss, we will have not only long-term allies rooting us on, but also people who we have at times been at odds with. Because everyone wants children to recover and thrive, and that’s only possible when our beloved community comes together and supports, not smears, public education and educators.

When we join in common cause, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals.

Are you with me?

Ready to tap into the literacy tools in Reading Universe? Ready to give kids great, free books as others ban them? Ready to help kids with practical skills and critical thinking with experiential learning in your classroom? Ready to make community schools the norm? Ready to take on social media companies?

Are you ready to join this campaign to make every public school in America a safe, welcoming, and joyful place where educators are respected and supported, parents are happy to send their kids, and students thrive?

No one can do all of this, but we all can do something. And through our union, we can achieve great things together that would be impossible alone.

Never ever forget, in this fight between hope and fear, between aspiration and despair, between light and darkness, you are the hope, the aspiration, and the light. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten.

Footnote 5

Reynolds, H. M., & Astor, R. A. (2023). Reimagining School Safety. *American Educator*, 47(1), 22-25.
https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor

Reimagining School Safety



By Heather M. Reynolds and Ron Avi Astor

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial justice movements have made it very apparent that our current approaches to keeping students safe and healthy in schools need major restructuring and reform. We lack mental health supports in many schools at a time when students need them most.¹ We are punishing and removing students of color from schools at much higher rates than white students, and students with disabilities are three times more likely to receive a punitive punishment than their nondisabled peers.² Additionally, there are strong calls from communities across the United States to remove law enforcement from schools immediately,

Heather M. Reynolds is a professor of teacher education in the School for Graduate Studies at SUNY Empire State College, where her research focuses on creating safe, engaging, and welcoming school and classroom environments. Ron Avi Astor is the Crump Professor in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, department of Social Welfare, with a joint appointment in the School of Education. His work focuses on the socio-ecological influences of society, family, community, school, and culture on different forms of school violence. This article is adapted from “Reimagining School Safety During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Call for Policy Strategies to Address Racial and Social Justice,” which Reynolds and Astor contributed to Our Children Can’t Wait: The Urgency of Reinventing Education Policy in America, edited by Joseph P. Bishop.

with little planning or data-driven support. With the infusion of federal money into states and schools to help address student achievement losses and mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity for real change.³ This is an opportunity to create sustainable systems and infrastructure that help local districts address their most pressing safety needs through districtwide data-driven strategies that show long-term, positive outcomes for the entire school community.⁴

Recent data show that 14 million students in the United States attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.⁵ The National Association of School Psychologists⁶ recommends that the ratio of school psychologists to students be at least 1 for every 500 students. Only one state met this recommendation as of 2021, and over 20 states had a ratio of more than 1,500 students per school psychologist.⁷ There is no national strategy or infrastructure to lower the ratio of students to counselors, social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals to ensure more supports are available to struggling students.⁸

In addition to diverting resources that could fund better mental health supports, punitive school security and discipline policies have a strong negative impact on students of color and students with disabilities. More specifically, suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to law enforcement, and punitive discipline rates are disproportionately and consistently higher for students of color and students with disabilities in urban, suburban, and rural communi-

ties across the United States, beginning even before students enter kindergarten.⁹ We should be asking what our schools need to be welcoming and supportive to all. And more importantly, how can policymakers help support that vision with infrastructure, training, and funding to ensure success and sustainability over time?

Shifting the Focus to Social, Emotional, and Mental Health, and a Positive School Climate

Reenvisioning education and schools across the United States must account for the large bodies of research showing that schools with strong, caring, culturally supportive, and positive climates can not only address issues of ongoing victimization but also prevent students from being victimized.¹⁰ Little evidence suggests that law enforcement strategies have prevented school shootings or made schools feel safer for students.¹¹ However, significant research has highlighted the negative impact that security, law enforcement, and punitive approaches can have on school climate, including lowering students' sense of belonging and safety and academic performance.¹² These negative outcomes disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities, which can lead to social isolation, disengagement, and dropping out of school.¹³ Given the existing evidence, policies need to shift from "hardening" practices (such as more police and metal detectors) to strategies that foster a positive community and civil relationships in schools.¹⁴

This change requires a shift of funding and support from policing, punishment, and surveillance to long-term investments in holistic prevention and empowerment of schools and communities. Given wide local, regional, and state variation in populations, the most effective and appropriate interventions are driven by local school safety assessments, capacity building, integration of academic and social goals, partnerships with community organizations, consideration of the voices of all school stakeholders, and collaborations with universities.¹⁵

The arguments to fund security measures in schools are generally based on fear, opinion, and often, political views.¹⁶ In most school shootings with mass casualties, schools had armed personnel either on campus at the time of the shooting or there within minutes,¹⁷ and their presence failed to prevent the shootings or stop the shooters from using weapons on school grounds (e.g., Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Robb Elementary School). Similarly, most mass shootings have occurred in schools that had security cameras, security protocols, and electronic monitoring systems.¹⁸ And finally, most shooters were students or former students who were familiar with the layout of the school rather than random strangers targeting a school.¹⁹

More than 20,000 school resource officers (SROs) work in schools across the country, which doesn't include the presence of armed security or "guardians" who are not active-duty law enforcement officers.²⁰ Federal funding (COPS in Schools and other grants) during the past several decades has encouraged schools to hire active-duty law enforcement to work full time in schools. Research on the effectiveness of SROs is mixed, and no definitive data have indicated that the presence of an SRO deters or lowers casualties in a mass school shooting.²¹

However, evidence suggests that punitive disciplinary policies and the presence of a law enforcement officer in schools can affect the numbers of students being arrested, with devastating effects on students of color and students with disabilities.²²

Although Black students represent 15 percent of student enrollment, they represent 29 percent of students referred to law enforcement and 32 percent of students subjected to school-related arrest.²³ Regarding students with disabilities, the rate of school arrests is three times that of students without disabilities, and it increases exponentially when police are present on campus.²⁴

Despite federal and state funding and incentives, most states have very limited guidance and legislation related to SRO training, and as of 2018, 18 states had "no laws on SRO certification, use,



Our Children Can't Wait

This article is adapted from chapter 11 of *Our Children Can't Wait: The Urgency of Reinventing Education Policy in America*. In this edited volume, scholars challenge inequality as something inevitable in America's schools and society, focusing on new, broader social policy responses to address persistent disparities in academic outcomes apparent by race and income. We explore the perspectives of multiple experts on interrelated policies beyond schools that profoundly affect students, such as neighborhood conditions, public health, community resources, housing, air quality, school safety, and segregation. An education policy playbook that looks both within and outside the school walls for solutions that begin to dismantle the entrenched forces of systemic racism in our country has never deserved greater attention or focus. That redemptive journey starts with making an unapologetic commitment to our young people. Our children can't wait.

—JOSEPH P. BISHOP

Joseph P. Bishop, editor of Our Children Can't Wait, is the executive director and cofounder of the Center for the Transformation of Schools in UCLA's School of Education & Information Studies. His research explores the role of policy in our society, specifically its impact on historically marginalized communities in education settings.



or training.”²⁵ The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the largest training organization for school-based police in the United States, recently released a statement about the importance of “local and collaborative” decision-making that focuses on “weighing the risk of harm” with potential benefits prior to hiring law enforcement to work in schools.²⁶

Creating a Positive, Supportive, and Welcoming School Climate

A large body of research has demonstrated the positive impact of whole-school and whole-child prevention approaches that focus on developing and maintaining a welcoming and supportive climate and minimizing the removal of students from school.²⁷ A positive school climate is characterized by respectful student, teacher, and staff relationships; teacher and peer support; clear, fair, and consistent rules and disciplinary policies; support for diversity and inclusion; effective school-home communication; and student engagement and a sense of belongingness in school and school activities.²⁸ Sharing some of the same core principles, social and emotional learning refers to supports and processes that help “children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”²⁹

School safety researchers know that there are promising, data-driven findings indicating that programs that focus on schoolwide or districtwide efforts to improve school climate and promote social and emotional learning can lower levels of victimization in school and increase feelings of safety for all students.³⁰ Strong evidence suggests that efforts to improve school climate or promote social and emotional learning are most impactful when

they are schoolwide or districtwide and involve all stakeholders. When these programs are implemented with consistency across a district, all students experience significant improvements in academic and victimization outcomes, along with a reduction in discrepancies in academic achievement and discipline among students of color, students with lower socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities.³¹

Restorative justice techniques and comprehensive threat-assessment teams are a promising alternative to punitive, zero-tolerance policies when these programs are part of the comprehensive safety plan for a school or district.³² Restorative justice practices focus on improving the overall culture and climate of the school through engaging in conflict resolution and problem solving; developing and nurturing positive relationships in the school environment; reinforcing positive communication strategies; encouraging all students to be actively involved in their school; and promoting, teaching, and reinforcing respect for one another.³³ Restorative practices, when clearly structured and used

schoolwide, can effectively disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.³⁴

Another effective alternative to zero-tolerance policies is comprehensive threat assessment.³⁵ Teams of trained school professionals use a step-by-step procedure to gather information and assess threats as either transient (not serious or intentional) or substantive (clear intent to carry out the threat). Appropriate interventions and supports are then instituted based on the needs of the student who made the threat and the safety needs of other students.³⁶ When threat assessment is implemented on a districtwide basis, multiple studies³⁷ have shown lower suspension rates across all racial and ethnic groups, a more positive school climate, fewer instances of bullying and violence, and increases in teachers feeling safe; one study found a 79 percent decrease in bullying.³⁸

Many schools have started to include positive social and emotional learning and climate measures but have not removed preexisting punitive approaches. The simultaneous use of punitive and positive approaches to safety in the same school or district can lead to confusion about student discipline and send inconsistent messages to students about behaviors and consequences. Rather than funding competing programs or policies with conflicting messages, there is a need to develop a unified whole-school approach to safety.³⁹ It is critical that school board members, superintendents, administrators, and teachers have access to research and training, both at the pre-service level and through professional development, on the devastating impact exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices can have on certain groups of students.⁴⁰ Adding social and emotional learning or a program focused on improving climate to a school or district while still utilizing policing or punitive discipline does not make sense, is confusing, and is not data driven. Yet many districts opt for both approaches as a form of political compromise without consideration of the mixed message this creates for the entire school community.

Key Components of an “Optimal” Vision of School Safety

The National Association of School Psychologists,⁴¹ in collaboration with NASRO and several other professional organizations, introduced recommendations that would allow districts to create and maintain comprehensive, research-based school safety policies. These recommendations include flexible and sustainable

Policies need to shift from “hardening” practices to strategies that foster a positive community and civil relationships in schools.





funding streams that allow schools to address their most pressing safety needs by promoting school-community partnerships, multi-tiered support systems, inter- and intra-agency collaborations, and the use of evidence-based standards.⁴² Partnerships, assessment, and sustainability are critical to the success of any school safety program.

From a policy standpoint, funding, flexibility, incentives, and infrastructure to promote collaborations between universities and local decision-makers would make it more viable for districts to use data from a wide range of stakeholders to address their most pressing school safety needs. These partnerships should be integrated into the curricula of teacher-, social worker-, school psychologist-, principal-, and superintendent-preparation programs in universities. Such partnerships would set up a system for key school personnel to develop an understanding of how to create welcoming, safe, and supportive schools through procedures and structures for collecting and using local data and constituent voices to drive safety policies and procedures in every school. Creating and sustaining infrastructure in preparation programs to encourage local data-driven decisions also would create an opportunity to address issues of school safety in terms of race, gender, disability status, policing and social justice, and punitive safety policies in an academic setting. In addition, this would help university-based preparation programs build capacity to help school professionals understand data-driven, welcoming, and growth-oriented school safety policies and practices.⁴³ And local decision-makers need to be able to advocate for and have resources and funding available to support a whole-school approach to safety, which is more likely to have an impact and be sustained over time.⁴⁴

Avast literature indicates what works and what doesn't work in the field of school safety. Drawing from evidence-based programs and policies that have a positive impact on perceptions of safety in schools⁴⁵ will help policymakers focus on the best ways to address their community's unique school and community safety needs.⁴⁶ Federal policies and funding that encourage schools to examine strategies for removing zero-tolerance, policing, and punitive policies are vital for a seismic shift to occur in how we approach school safety. It is critical that local stakeholders and decision-makers have the support of university collaborators to collect and analyze their own data and make evidence-based decisions that are appropriate for their

district. Decades of research show that any "hardening" of security efforts needs to consider the potential impact on the climate of schools and the disproportionate impact punitive discipline can have on students of color and students with disabilities in terms of academic success and feelings of connection to school.⁴⁷

Federal and state policymakers need to direct legislation and funding away from school policing to more holistic, supportive, and nonpunitive practices. There are some promising signs, including the Every Student Succeeds Act allowing some flexibility for states to examine school climate and social-emotional variables to help meet the reporting requirements for school quality or student success.⁴⁸ Although not required, departments of education at the state level can choose to look at school climate and/or social and emotional learning through support from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments and/or apply for federal grant opportunities such as the School Climate Transformation Grant.⁴⁹ This is a promising step, but the funding for these initiatives is still miniscule when compared to the funding allocated to school-based policing. Incentivizing or requiring all states to evaluate school climate through providing infrastructure and financial support for collaborations between districts and researchers would likely increase the number of districts that include these variables in academic and safety-related discussions.

Years of research show us the value and effectiveness of inclusive and comprehensive safety programs and policies, prevention and investment in data-driven practices, and the creation of welcoming and supportive schools and districts.⁵⁰ Empowering districts to invest in long-term, research-based solutions can begin with national calls to examine punitive disciplinary policies in every district and to consider holistic and empowering models for safety. There are so much data to spark this conversation (e.g., Civil Rights Data Collection, Welcoming Empowerment Monitoring Approach). We now need structures and incentives for bringing decision-makers and researchers together over time for meaningful and goal-oriented interactions. Encouraging discussion and partnerships in the area of school safety is a key component of creating and sustaining holistic, evidence-based, financially viable, relevant, and data-driven school safety solutions that work for all. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor.

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Restorative justice practices can disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.

Footnote 6

(2022, July 14). *FACT SHEET: 'What Kids and Communities Need' Campaign*. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2022/wkn_fact_sheet_2022_final.pdf

More: www.aft.org/whatkidsneed



Back-to-school time is a time for fresh starts: new teachers, new classrooms, maybe even a new school. It's a time to reconnect with old friends and make a few new ones. This year, back-to-school season feels especially important.

The past few years have been tough on kids, parents and teachers. We have confronted enormous challenges, including the pandemic and culture wars aimed at undermining public schools. Teachers are burned out. Parents are overwhelmed. And many kids are anxious. But as the new school year begins, we remain hopeful and excited that we can turn this around by focusing on what kids and communities need. It starts with getting kids what they need to thrive and live meaningful and fulfilling lives. We are looking forward to working with school staff, parents, administrators and the entire school community to make sure kids feel safe and welcomed in their public schools and have access to the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life. Instead of banning books and censoring curriculums, we will focus on providing a strong foundation in math, reading, science, critical thinking and practical life skills. We are renewing our commitment to be problem-solvers in finding solutions to staff shortages and school safety, in addressing student stress and trauma, and in fighting for school resources—all essential issues that must be tackled to make schools places where teachers want to teach, parents want to send their children, and students thrive.

Every element of the What Kids and Communities Need campaign has us working together for the sake of our kids. When we work together, we bring hope into our schools and our communities. We bring the promise of a brighter future. Come join us. We need every one of you.

Footnote 7

(n.d.). 'What Kids and Communities Need'. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.aft.org/whatkidsneed>



Our public schools, our democracy, our freedoms and the well-being of our families and communities are all on the line. Amid growing extremism, so much is at stake. And while others attack our institutions and smear working people, America's educators, school and higher education staff, nurses, healthcare professionals and public employees are rolling up our sleeves to help our students, patients and communities build a better life for themselves and their families.

We are creating a stronger, more diverse union that provides a voice at work and in our democracy. Working with parents, allies and community partners, we're focusing on the basics people need to thrive: strong public schools, colleges and universities; accessible healthcare and a robust public health infrastructure; safe neighborhoods; and an economy that rewards work, not just wealth.

Our priorities in the upcoming months will focus on:

- Electing pro-worker, pro-community, pro-public education candidates up and down the ballot, so the people who represent us will share our values and help turn them into action.
- Supporting growth and diversity within our union and the broader labor movement, including strengthening collective bargaining so we can help build an economy that works for everyone.
- Defending our democracy and freedoms against unprecedented attacks and extremism, strengthening our civic institutions and protecting voting rights.
- Focusing on what our kids need, and what educators need to help kids succeed, especially in our public schools, colleges and universities.
- Demonstrating the value of belonging to a union and the important role unions play in communities.
- Engaging with our communities, deepening relationships and sustaining the coalitions necessary to build power so working people can have a better life.

Together, we can accomplish what would be impossible to do alone.

#WHATKIDSNEED

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO • 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. • Washington, DC 20001 • 202-879-4400 • www.aft.org



Press Release

In Address to Union, AFT's Weingarten Launches 'What Kids and Communities Need' Campaign, Celebrates Herculean Work of Educators, Healthcare Professionals and Public Employees

For Release:

Thursday, July 14, 2022

Contact:

Andrew Crook

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acrook@aft.org

BOSTON—American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten [addressed more than 3,000 delegates today](#) at the union's 87th biennial convention, launching a landmark [What Kids and Communities Need campaign](#) and challenging the union's 1.7 million members to fight for freedom and democracy, uphold decency and dignity, and “knit the rich tapestry of our country together ... by rebuilding the essential foundations for a better life for all.”

In a wide-ranging State of the Union speech, Weingarten called out the politicization of schools and students. “Too many politicians ... stoke grievances rather than solve problems. They should be helping us help our kids and our communities, not making it harder with their culture wars and division,” she said. “Here’s how I see it: This moment can be viewed through the lens of fear or hope; despair or aspiration; self-interest or the greater

good. The members of this union definitively, defiantly and undeniably choose hope, aspiration and the greater good.”

She also honored and thanked the members for their heroic work. Healthcare members were on the frontlines of the pandemic, caring for patients, and the union secured \$3 million worth of personal protective equipment to keep them safe. In 2021, the union launched a \$5 million Back to School for All initiative serving 20 million students, helping safely reopen school buildings and supporting summer school enrichment programs, vaccination clinics and after-school reading support.

[What Kids and Communities Need](#) is a new effort to invest in public schools and communities and challenge elected officials on the federal, state and local levels to lead on education. The campaign centers around the essentials that kids need to recover and thrive, instead of politics and division: It focuses on commonsense initiatives like promoting reading and career and technical education, addressing the teacher shortage, investing in school-based enrichment programs that support student success, and encouraging candidates and elected leaders to get “back to basics” on public education.

The AFT is also urging parents and teachers to take action—by voting against politicians who are focused on things like book banning, culture wars and injecting division into our classrooms, rather than investing in mental health resources, literacy programs and efforts to reduce class sizes.

“While extremist politicians are trying to drive a wedge between parents and teachers by banning books, censoring curriculum and politicizing public education, we’re focused on investing in public schools and the essential knowledge and skills students need,” Weingarten said. “We’re focused on accelerating learning, not just catching up. We are fighting for the conditions students need to thrive, like state-of-the-art buildings, with good ventilation, smaller class sizes and mental health resources.”

The speech acknowledged that despite the remarkable work of AFT members nationwide, partisan extremists are hell-bent on “dividing Americans from one another, spreading lies and hate, and breaking all the democratic norms to enrich themselves and grab power.” In fact, [recent polling](#) shows that

Americans are fed up with politicians trying to politicize public schools and instead, want to prioritize teaching fundamental skills.

Weingarten encouraged delegates to remain focused on the essentials that help bring people together and build a better life: safety, including commonsense gun safety and protections for LGBTQIA+ students; partnerships between parents and educators; and the knowledge and skills kids need to thrive in today's world. And she reminded them that [88 percent of the public](#) believes educators and schools did all they could to help children during the pandemic.

Journey for Justice Alliance National Director Jitu Brown called the campaign an important step in the fight for educational equity for all students, saying: "It is way overdue to focus on equity, providing children what they need to reach their full potential. We cannot get there if we are not honest about our failures. We will not take our eyes off the prize; equity or else."

The campaign's specific commitments include:

- Awarding \$1.5 million in grants to parents and teachers through the AFT Powerful Partnerships Institute to support community engagement by helping parents and teachers find new ways to work together for the benefit of kids.

- Advocating for commonsense policies—improved climate, culture, conditions and compensation—to address the teacher shortage and teacher burnout through the AFT [Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force](#).

- Quadrupling the number of community schools over the next five years. Community schools help children and families get the healthcare, food assistance and other essentials they need in one place. The AFT and its affiliates already support more than 700 such schools nationwide.

- Promoting, supporting and extending critical career and technical education programs, and offering students reliable, accessible pathways to college and career opportunities. From cybersecurity to culinary arts, aviation and auto and transit tech to healthcare and green jobs—high-quality CTE programs can equip young people with the

knowledge and skills they need for career and life, and can serve as a catalyst for community partnerships like those in McDowell County, W.Va., and a new program in New Lexington, Ohio.

Encouraging kids to read more and improve their reading skills through a campaign to give away 1 million books so that they have books to read at home. The AFT has already distributed 612,686 books during [Reading Opens the World](#) events hosted by more than 100 local affiliates in 20 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Once the initiative reaches the 1 million mark, the AFT will commit to giving away 2 million books.

Red, Wine and Blue founder Katie Paris welcomed What Kids and Communities Need, saying: “Parent-teacher collaboration is key to student success, and we’re not about to let right-wing extremists tear us apart. We reject political division and embrace public education because we believe in the strength of our communities and the ideals of our country. Unlike the extreme politicians using our kids to distract and divide us, the parent-teacher team will always put our kids first.”

Weingarten told delegates they have a crucial role to play in these fraught moments. And she recognized that each member is in their important profession for a reason, heralding the AFT’s advocacy in repairing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which has wiped \$8.1 billion of borrowers’ debt. She lauded the more than 100 AFT locals that joined the March for Our Lives in its National Day of Action for gun safety.

Weingarten urged members to organize and mobilize and to use the power of the union as a force for good in these perilous economic times. She reminded them of the broad popularity of labor unions, saying, “There is power in the union. Two-thirds of Americans support unions, the highest level since 1965. And nearly half of nonunion workers say they would join a union in their workplace if they had the chance. ... This is the moment for our movement. Unions built the middle class in America, and we can rebuild it through the transformative power of collective bargaining. The essence of unionism is simple yet powerful: Together we can accomplish things that would be impossible alone.”

She reminded members that with its roots in social justice, the union carries a unique responsibility to stand up for democracy, freedom and the sanctity of basic institutions, calling this moment in history a 10-alarm fire, and urging members to keep in mind that “everything is at risk: our freedoms, our democracy, our basic economic safety net.”

Weingarten ended with a particularly poignant call to action—to get out and vote, but also to acknowledge the basic humanity of all people, and to leave the convention feeling motivated, with a plan of action: “To stand up and be counted. To live our convictions. To engage, not withdraw.

“No matter how tired or how frustrated we are, we cannot be bystanders.”

The full text of the speech [can be found here](#).

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The AFT represents 1.7 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.

Footnote 8

(2023, August 31). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN JOINS CEASEFIREPA, CONGRESSWOMAN MARY GAY SCANLON, AND ADVOCACY PARTNERS TO CALL FOR ACTION ON GUN LEGISLATION.* Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/ceasefirepa>



AFT Pennsylvania
A Union of Professionals

AFT Pennsylvania
President Arthur Steinberg

Testimony for the
Basic Education Funding Commission

Thursday, September 14, 2023 | Written Testimony

Good afternoon, members of the General Assembly and designees of Governor Shapiro's Administration. Thank you for allowing me to testify today to the needs of our schools in addressing childhood trauma and mental health.

I'm Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the state chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents about 36,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, school staff, higher education faculty and staff, and state workers across 64 local unions.

As this committee considers the basic funding needs of the Commonwealth's 499 school districts, it is vital to understand the ever-changing needs of our students that are a result of chronic underfunding. It is the underfunding of our schools that made it difficult or impossible to safely return to in-person learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic;ⁱ it is the underfunding of our schools that makes it difficult to attract and retain teachers in the profession, and it is the underfunding of our schools that has ultimately not supplied the support system needed to improve the mental health of our young people.

The depth and breadth of the student mental health crisis may not yet be determined, but it is our members—educators, paraprofessionals, staff, and school counselors—who encounter the brunt of the effects each day. In fact, more than 75% of schools surveyed last year said, "their teachers and staff have voiced concerns about student depression, anxiety, and trauma."ⁱⁱ

In addition to the disconnectedness experienced by students during the pandemic, the ongoing gun violence epidemic causes continued harm to the mental health of our students—whether they live in a community ravaged by gun violence, have lost a family member to a gun crime, or if they are afraid of the ever-too-common shootings that occur in schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

Incredibly, "some [70% of children](#) in the U.S. who seek and receive mental health support get it at school."^{iv} But schools struggle to address these needs. The recommended ratio is 250 students for every school counselor, but in the US, the average is 415 to 1. When it comes to school psychologists, the numbers are much worse. In Pennsylvania, the ratio of students to school psychologists is 1038 to 1, over twice the recommendation.^v

The good news is that we can change the trajectory of mental health in our schools through smart investment. The American Federation of Teacher's long-held belief is that community schools are a path toward filling the educational, physical, mental health, and equity gaps that have widened through lack of funding.

Not to be confused with traditional neighborhood public schools, community schools leverage community partnerships to provide on-site, wrap around services aligned with student and family needs. Community school buildings are open before school, after school, weekends and summers. Common aspects of community schools are integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice.^{vi}

Strong evidence of improving health, including the mental health of students in community schools comes from the literature on school-based health centers (SBHCs). These school-based health centers have been shown to contribute to improved access to mental health services for students which, in turn, has been associated with students being less likely to use or abuse substances such as marijuana and alcohol, less likely to carry a weapon, and less likely to fight. Students who used SBHCs were found to have increased attendance compared to nonusers, and students who used mental health services of SBHCs demonstrated achievement increases compared to nonusers.^{vii}

Many community schools already exist, including here in Philadelphia, in Pittsburgh, and elsewhere across the nation in cities and towns like Oakland, Boston, Cincinnati, and New York. There are dozens of successful examples of community schools that have helped buoy student achievement and the health of families and communities.

But we don't need to go to Oakland, Boston, Cincinnati, or New York for examples of successful community schools. In Pittsburgh, Faison K-5 and Langley preK-8 are standout examples of programs which focus on academics, enrichment, health and social supports, youth and community development and family engagement. We would be happy to arrange for members of this commission to visit one of these outstanding community schools to help shed light on their benefits to kids and communities.

Funding exists for these services. In fact, the Biden Administration has already secured \$150 million to assist states and local education agencies with setting up full-service community schools.^{viii} To address the ongoing and, unfortunately, increasing mental health needs in our schools, the public education system in Pennsylvania needs funds to invest in wraparound services such as mental health supports, dental services, and assistance with shelter and nutrition.

Thank you.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/27/health/schools-indoor-air-covid.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-worse-than-we-realize/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/school-shootings-and-student-mental-health.p>

^{iv} <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/the-benefits-of-mental-health-programs-in-schools>

^v <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists>

^{vi} <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>

^{vii} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5126019/>

^{viii} <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/18/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-efforts-to-support-community-schools/>

CEASE FIRE PA CONFERENCE

City Hall

Thursday, August 31, 2023 | 3:00PM

Jerry Jordan, President, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers



Good afternoon. While I appreciate the opportunity to join so many valued partners today, I wish that events like these, where we once again call attention to the urgent need for legislative action around gun violence, were unnecessary.

- Again and again we gather, we rally, we march, we call out the deeply human toll of this devastating crisis, but *Republican leaders at both the state and federal levels rebuke our collective efforts to something so fundamental— **safety in our daily lives.***

In just a few short days, our students will enter their classrooms for the first time this school year— classrooms that educators have been working all week (and truthfully much of the summer) to prepare as they plan for the year ahead.

- This is a time filled with **hope**, with **anticipation**, and with the **dreams** and **aspirations** of the very future of this great city and nation—*our children.*
 - But once again, the year begins with the pervasive gun crisis that has wreaked havoc on so many of our young people's lives.
- Last school year alone, **thirty three of our students were killed** and **199 were shot**— these are numbers with names behind each of them—and these numbers and names should horrify us all.
- In just the last few days, we have seen the horrific racist murder of three individuals in **Jacksonville** and the murder of a **UNC professor.**

And as we begin the school year ahead, ***it is absolutely reprehensible that Congress would do anything but take the urgent action this moment demands.***

- There are legislative solutions that exist—and they are simple. I will defer to Congresswoman Scanlon to outline more about this legislation, but it should be no question that assault weapons have no place in our society.

Every day, guns rob our students and communities of so much.

-
- Children should be able to play outside,
 - Students and staff should be able to go to and from school – and work and learn in school buildings,
 - Neighbors should be able to come together for a block party,
 - and seniors should be able to take transit to go the doctor
 - ***without fear.***

But every day that Congress refuses to act, those fears are all too real. And the reality is far too deadly.

- Shame on every single elected official who refuses to act with the life and death urgency this crisis demands.

Thank you.

Footnote 9

Edmund, M. (2022). Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color. *Center for American Progress*.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gun-violence-disproportionately-and-overwhelmingly-hurts-communities-of-color/>

Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color

By Marissa Edmund June 30, 2022

Gun violence is a major problem in the United States as well as the key driver of the rise in violent crime across the nation.¹ Notably, gun violence has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities and is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods that have historically been underresourced and racially segregated. This is due to a combination of weak gun laws; systemic racial inequities, including unequal access to safe housing and adequate educational and employment opportunities; and a history of disinvestment in public infrastructure and services in the communities of color most affected by gun violence.

To reduce gun violence in these communities, U.S. policymakers must complement commonsense gun laws with investments in community-based violence intervention (CVI) initiatives and policies to address root causes of gun violence.

Gun homicides are on the rise in the United States, with young Black and brown people experiencing the highest rates

- Young Black Americans (ages 15 to 34) experience the highest rates of gun homicides across all demographics.²
- Black Americans are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide.³
- In 2020, 12,179 Black Americans were killed with guns, compared with 7,286 white Americans:⁴
 - While Black Americans made up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population that year, they were the victims in 61 percent of all gun homicides.⁵
- Black Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to be fatally shot by police.⁶
- 60 percent of gun deaths among Hispanic and Latino people are gun homicides.⁷
- Young Hispanic Americans (ages 15 to 29) represent 4 percent of the population yet are victims in 8 percent of all gun homicides.⁸

- In 2015, half of all gun homicides took place in just 127 cities across the country:
 - Gun homicides are concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods in these cities, which have historically been underresourced and racially segregated.⁹

Women of color are more likely than their white counterparts to be shot and killed with firearms

- Black women are twice as likely as white women to be fatally shot by an intimate partner.¹⁰
- American Indian and Alaska Native women are killed by intimate partners at a rate of 4.3 per 100,000, compared with 1.5 per 100,000 for white women.¹¹
- Guns are used in more than half of all homicides of women and are disproportionately used against Black women.¹²
- Even when firearms are not used to kill or injure, they are used to threaten women at alarming rates:
 - 4.5 million women alive today have reported being threatened with a firearm.¹³

Nonfatal gun violence has a lasting impact on individuals and communities

- For every gun homicide there are more than two nonfatal gun shootings.¹⁴
- From 2009 to 2018, the rate of gun-related assaults against Black and Hispanic Americans was 208.9 and 128.7, respectively, per 100,000, compared with 90.5 per 100,000 for white Americans.¹⁵
- Nine in 10 survivors of gun violence report experiencing trauma from their incident.¹⁶

Solutions: In addition to stronger, commonsense gun laws, policymakers must address systemic racial inequities.

- Policymakers should dismantle racist policies in policing, access to housing, education, and employment in order to address root causes of gun violence.¹⁷
- The country must invest in community violence intervention (CVI) programs:
 - CVIs focus on partnerships with those most affected by gun violence, government, and community stakeholders to bring community-specific solutions to gun violence.¹⁸
- Domestic abusers must be prevented from accessing firearms:
 - Gaps in legislation, such as the “dating partner loophole,” allow some abusers to access firearms even if they have been convicted of a domestic violence crime.¹⁹
 - In June 2022, President Joe Biden signed into law the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, a gun violence prevention package that included some, but not all, priorities to curb gun violence across the country. This package partially closed the dating partner loophole by prohibiting some dating partners convicted of domestic violence misdemeanors from owning or

purchasing a firearm. However, dating partners who are issued final protective orders can still possess firearms.²⁰

- Women in communities of color have unique needs and challenges that prevent them from both seeking help and accessing services. Solutions should, therefore, be driven by the needs of this group.

Conclusion

Communities of color disproportionately bear the brunt of gun violence in the United States. Commonsense gun laws as well as direct investments in the communities that are most affected by gun violence are crucial to ending gun violence and saving lives.

Endnotes

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Keeping Students Safe from Gun Violence

This article is adapted from *How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe*, by the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund in partnership with the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). Together, as the report states, we are “working to ensure our approach to safer schools is driven by evidence, expertise, and care.” The full report, which is available in English (go.aft.org/9uh) and Spanish (go.aft.org/afl), includes detailed recommendations derived from high-quality research on helpful and harmful practices.

—EDITORS

For the last 20 years, students, educators, and parents have lived with the reality of increasingly frequent school shootings. The worst period for this violence has been in the 2021–22 school year, which saw nearly quadruple the average number of gunfire incidents since 2013. From an average of 49 incidents in every school year since 2013, this past school year saw 193 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of preschools and K–12 schools.

We need meaningful actions to keep our schools and surrounding communities safe, actions that address what we know about gun violence in America’s schools. It’s time for our leaders to adopt a multifaceted approach that provides school communities with the tools they need to prevent school-based gun violence. *How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe* focuses on approaches that have been proven most effective, such as keeping guns out of the hands of people who shouldn’t have them in the first place, fostering safe and trusting school environments, crisis intervention programs, access and lock upgrades, and trauma-informed emergency planning.

The report provides a proactive plan to prevent active shooter incidents and, more broadly, address gun violence in all its forms in America’s schools. Using what we know about school gun violence, our organizations have put together a plan that focuses on intervening before violence occurs. These solutions work hand in hand to foster safe and nurturing schools, to address violence at its earliest stages, and to block easy access to firearms by those who would do harm.

In order to effectively address violence in our schools, we must first acknowledge that school violence is, in part, a gun violence

problem. Many “comprehensive” school safety plans have been proposed over the last 20 years. Few have thoroughly addressed the issue common in all school shootings: easy access to guns for those at risk of committing harm. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA firmly believe that any effective school safety plan must involve an effort to enact gun safety policies that enable intervention before a prospective shooter can get their hands on a gun. These policies work hand in hand with school-based interventions to create safer school climates and to intervene before a student becomes a shooter.

When communities are focused on student well-being, schools can be places of care and compassion for the challenges kids face, while also creating the conditions for preventing school shootings and other violence. Given that most school-age shooters are current or former students and that they nearly always show warning signs, the locus of school violence prevention must necessarily center around schools. Therefore, our recommendations address both gun safety policies and school-based interventions.

Recommendations

Gun Safety Policies

1. Enact and Enforce Secure Firearm Storage Laws

The most common sources of guns used in school shootings and across all school gun violence incidents are the shooter’s home or the homes of friends or relatives. This is unsurprising, as nearly 4.6 million American children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked. Secure firearm storage laws require that people store firearms securely when they are not in their possession in order to prevent unauthorized access. Under these laws, generally, when a person accesses a firearm and does harm with it, the person who failed to securely store the firearm is responsible. Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia currently have some form of secure storage law. In addition, several cities have passed secure storage laws. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states enact and enforce secure firearm storage laws. In addition, policymakers should promote public awareness programs that can encourage secure gun storage and induce behavior change.



Any effective school safety plan must involve an effort to enact gun safety policies.

2. Pass Extreme Risk Laws

Extreme risk laws create a legal process by which law enforcement, family members, and, in some states, educators can petition a court to temporarily prevent a person from having access to firearms when there is evidence that they are at serious risk of harming themselves or others, giving them the time they need to get help. Extreme risk protection orders, sometimes also called red flag orders or gun violence restraining orders, can be issued only after a legal determination is made that a person poses a serious threat to themselves or others. They also contain strong due process protections to ensure that a person’s rights are balanced with public safety.

Because extreme risk laws are a proven tool with strong due process protections, they enjoy strong bipartisan support. Nineteen states and DC now have extreme risk laws on the books. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that these

states train law enforcement on the availability and use of these laws and that public awareness campaigns help to make knowledge of this option widely known. School officials also need to know that this tool is available to them as part of a comprehensive intervention with a student who is at serious risk to themselves or others.

Targeted gun safety policies and school-based interventions can address violence before it occurs.

3. Raise the Age to Purchase Semi-Automatic Firearms

Despite the evidence that most active shooters are school-age and have a connection to the school, few states have stepped in to close gaps that allow minors to legally purchase high-powered firearms. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA believe states and the federal government should raise the minimum age to purchase or possess handguns and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns to 21 in order to prevent school-age shooters from easily obtaining firearms. Under federal law, in order to purchase a handgun from a licensed gun dealer, a person must be 21. Yet to purchase that same handgun in an unlicensed sale (online or from a private individual), or to purchase a rifle or shotgun from a licensed dealer, a person only has to be 18. Only a few states have acted to close these gaps. Minimum-age laws can work in tandem with secure storage and extreme risk laws to cut off an easy way for shooters to obtain firearms.

4. Require Background Checks on All Gun Sales

Background checks are proven to reduce gun violence. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia already require a background check on all handgun sales. State laws requiring background checks for all handgun sales—by point-of-sale check and/or permit—are associated with lower firearm homicide rates, lower firearm suicide rates, and lower firearm trafficking.

Current federal law requires that background checks be conducted whenever a person attempts to purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer, to ensure that the prospective buyer is not legally prohibited from possessing guns. For example, when a person becomes subject to an extreme risk protection order, that record is entered into the federal background check database, and a background check at the point of sale prevents that person from buying a firearm at a gun store. However, current federal law does not require background checks on sales between unlicensed parties, including those at gun shows or online. As such, people with dangerous histories can easily circumvent the background check system. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states and the federal government act to pass laws that require background checks on all gun sales so that potential shooters cannot easily purchase firearms.

School-Based Interventions

5. Foster a Safe and Trusting School Climate

Supportive and trusting school environments are the strongest way to prevent school violence. One means of creating safe schools is to support them to become “community schools” that work with local partners to provide valuable services that help uplift the entire community. They not only become centers of education but fulfill a broader purpose of contributing to stable, healthy, and safe neighborhoods.

Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that schools utilize district, state, and federal funding to help schools partner with community members to move beyond the normal confines of a school, particularly in communities that experience high rates of gun violence. In schools facing high levels of violence in and outside of the school building, a community school might fund programs such as creating safe passages to and from school, granting alternatives to out-of-school suspensions that offer meaningful educational opportunities for students, providing family counseling, increasing access to mentoring both in and outside of school, and incorporating restorative justice into discipline policies. Significant resources must also be provided to assist students impacted by gun violence. Educators see that the trauma and anxiety that gun violence creates does not simply vanish. Students carry this trauma and fear with them inside and outside the classroom. All levels of government must invest resources to ensure that



every school has the appropriate number of mental health professionals on staff and that other mental health support programs are in place.

6. Build a Culture of Secure Gun Storage

In addition to enacting secure storage laws, policymakers and educators should encourage a culture of secure gun storage by increasing awareness of secure storage practices. Governors, federal and state departments of health and education, legislatures, nonprofit organizations, and local officials should also work together to develop and fund programs that increase awareness of the need to store firearms securely. Schools should distribute information to parents about the importance of secure storage. Thus far, school districts comprising nearly three million students have taken this vital action. Encouraging secure storage practices can make an enormous difference in reducing gun violence in school communities and would address the most common source of firearms used in school gun violence incidents.

7. Create Trauma-Informed Crisis Intervention Practices in Schools

The most important thing that schools can do to prevent active shooter incidents—and gun violence overall—is to intervene before a person commits an act of violence. To do this in a manner that serves students and protects the community, Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that schools, concurrent with other community partners, create trauma-informed crisis intervention practices involving the convening of a multidisciplinary team that responds when a student shows they may be in crisis. These teams receive information about a student



in crisis, evaluate the situation, and design interventions to prevent violence and provide appropriate treatment, support, and resources. State legislatures should also make funding available for schools to invest in personnel training and the mental healthcare resources needed to promote the restorative justice and de-escalation practices that trauma-informed crisis intervention requires. Based on what we know about school violence, it is critical to respond to many forms of student crises, such as

housing instability or substance abuse, not only threats of violence.

Most students facing crises will never commit an act of violence and must not be treated like criminals. Our recommended practice is the opposite of “zero tolerance” and is not based on a punitive or criminal justice approach and should not rely on exclusionary discipline as a means of intervention. A school needs to be a trusted place where students feel safe to share when they or someone else is in crisis, knowing that it will lead to help and support rather than punishment or prison. Any crisis intervention program must be paired with a rigorous assessment of efficacy and collateral harms to prevent disproportionate or unwarranted interventions. Any decision that leads to punitive action or law enforcement engagement requires thorough review by school district leaders, as these instances need to be the rare exception to a healthy program based on supportive intervention.

8. Implement Access Control Measures and Door Locks

The most effective physical security measures—the ones on which most experts agree—are access control measures that keep shooters out of schools in the first place. As a secondary measure, internal door locks, which enable teachers to lock doors from the inside, can work to deter active shooters who are able to access the school, protecting students and allowing law enforcement time to neutralize any potential threat. Preventing unauthorized access to schools through fencing, single access points, and simply ensuring that doors are locked can keep shooters out of schools. State legislatures should provide

funding for access control measures for schools to ensure that would-be shooters cannot have easy access.

9. Initiate Trauma-Informed Emergency Planning

Security experts agree that school personnel need to have an effective emergency plan in place to respond quickly to and neutralize any threat. Recommendations for effective planning include efforts to ensure that schools work with law enforcement and first responders to provide information about the school’s layout and security measures, that staff and law enforcement work together to ensure that they can identify the nature of a threat, and that schools make a detailed plan for their lockdown and evacuation procedures. Emergency procedures must be trauma-informed, meaning that their design should be buttressed by trigger warnings and access to mental health counseling and should never simulate an active shooter event. Trauma-informed emergency planning requires that the staff involved have tools to change emergency and evacuation planning in real time, should any activities prove harmful to anyone participating.

Supportive, trusting school environments are the strongest way to prevent school violence.

10. Avoid Practices That Can Cause Harm and Traumatize Students

Research shows that three practices—arming teachers, shooter drills involving students, and law enforcement in schools—are ineffective in preventing school gun violence or protecting the school community when shootings do occur, while introducing new risks and causing harm to students and school communities. We share the desire to respond to unthinkable tragedy with strong solutions. But as the report details, arming teachers is an ineffective and risky approach that does not stop gun violence in our schools. A wealth of research demonstrates that

allowing teachers to carry guns in schools increases the everyday risks to students. Similarly, frequent school shooter drills involving students, particularly those that simulate a real shooting, are having measurable impacts on the stress and anxiety levels of students, parents, and educators alike. Finally, the traditional model of law enforcement working in schools has not been shown to reduce school shootings or gun incidents, but the presence of law enforcement has played a heavy role in criminalizing students, particularly students of color, and can have a negative impact on learning outcomes for all students. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA urge our leaders to instead adopt solutions that are proven to address what we know about school gun violence.

Using the comprehensive plan outlined in *How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe*, policymakers and school communities can work together to prevent active shooter incidents—and gun violence more broadly—in their classrooms. These solutions form a thorough strategy by providing points of intervention at each level of a shooter’s escalation to violence and by creating a system where people with dangerous histories cannot easily access guns. Targeted gun violence prevention policies are designed to intervene when a shooter is intent on getting their hands on a gun. School-based strategies work to provide holistic support for students and intervene in situations where warning signs are showing a student in crisis. Finally, the planning and security strategies present a last opportunity for intervention and ensure that a school is prepared to quickly respond to and neutralize any threat. □

For more on preventing school shootings, along with extensive endnotes, see go.aft.org/9uh.



Footnote 11

(n.d.). *The Children of Philadelphia Have Been Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis*. Senator Hughes. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.senatorhughes.com/the-children-of-philadelphia-have-been-attending-toxic-schools-for-years-this-is-a-national-crisis/>



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Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis

The children of Philadelphia are in dire need of our help. They are at the mercy of a man-made, ticking time bomb that is nearly inescapable. I'm talking about toxic schools. Conditions in Philadelphia schools have **needed a remedy for many years**. Lead, asbestos, mold and other toxins are far too common in our aging school infrastructure, but folks have been vigilantly fighting for justice, proposing the necessary resources and means to make a difference.

One such school building, Cassidy Elementary, remains at the center of the conversation about toxic schools, largely due to the efforts of a heroic student, **Chelsea Mungo**.

Following my visit to Cassidy with other advocates in 2016, Chelsea and nearly three dozen of her schoolmates wrote various legislators, asking for change in their school. A fourth-grade student at the time, Chelsea wrote that going to school felt like going to prison. She also questioned why her skin color affected her ability to receive a quality education in a clean, safe facility.

The fight for environmental justice regained national attention a few years ago with the tragedy of the water in Flint, Mich. We know the story of Flint well. The fact that it remains unresolved and that Flint residents are still drinking bottled water is criminal and a national embarrassment.

As **W. Kamau Bell** said in the most recent episode of the **United Shades of America** on CNN: “This isn’t just a Philadelphia problem, it’s an America problem.”

This is a national crisis. Public school buildings in black, brown and poor communities are filled with lead paint, which was outlawed in 1978 because of its poisonous content. The American Society of Civil Engineers’ Infrastructure Report Card gives the nation’s 100,000 public school buildings a D-plus grade for their conditions.

Our children are overwhelmed by these toxic school buildings that state law mandates they attend. I say mandate because most states have a minimum requirement of the number of days children are to attend school. In Pennsylvania, it’s 180 days. Therefore, our students are required to attend school in toxic buildings, usually filled with lead, asbestos, or mold, and which are often rodent infested.

Think about the cruelty of that. The absurdity of that. The immorality of that.

After a year of raising hell with the spirit of Chelsea’s letter in hand, **I announced \$15.7 million in funding for an immediate cleanup and remediation in city schools**, alongside Gov. Tom Wolf and Mayor Jim Kenney. That money paid for 59 projects at city schools and improved conditions for about 29,000 students. Cassidy, which has been **referred to as the district’s worst building, will be demolished** and a new building is set to open in 2021.

These victories have made a difference, but we’re not stopping there. Philadelphia schools still need more than \$4.5 billion in structural repairs to improve the conditions for every single student mandated to attend toxic schools.

Philadelphia is a city with **a lead problem worse than the infamous issues in Flint**, so it is important we address lead and other toxic conditions in our schools and communities immediately. I have been working with the **Fund Our Facilities Coalition** to address the issues in Philadelphia schools. We welcome anyone who wants to participate and advocate on behalf of our children.

As I said when Chelsea stepped on the floor of the Pennsylvania Senate in June 2017: “We will not let them down.”

Testimony of Ashley Cocca

On January 4, 2022, I attended a virtual Counselor PD given by the SDP. Network of Neighbors presented. If you don't know what the Network of Neighbors is, you should. Under the city's DBHIDS office, the Network of Neighbors is a Trauma Response Network. They spoke about their program and how they come alongside communities who've experienced toxic stress, trauma, loss, and violence within their own communities. They spoke about how they respond to tragedy at the school level. I sat in the PD thinking to myself, "I am glad this type of support exists and I'm so fortunate that our school community has never needed to call on them." The next morning was January 5, 2022. The morning of the Fairmount Fire. The morning that Bache-Martin's school community lost 12 beautiful souls and we, like so many, looked on in terror and were marked by trauma. Our school community changed, traumatic stress entered our bodies and minds, and I didn't know how we could ever recover. My brain did what it had to do and I responded in task-mode. Organizing the red cross, talking to our SDP supports, crafting messaging to students, families, and the community. I understood my task. I had to take care of my community. My 500 students. All of their families. Then the Network of Neighbors came and they took care of me. My school counseling colleagues came and cared for my students, my staff, and me. It was a time of intense devastation and the effects still linger.

The truth is the tragedy of the Fairmount Fire is one example of the type of trauma that impacts our city. Trauma is not always a large-scale tragedy. Sometimes trauma is the headline on CNN. Most of the time and what I see every day is that trauma is nuanced and subtle. It is the backdrop of Philadelphia life. It is the water we are swimming in. I could sit here and read three minutes of staggering statistics that tell the narrative of what the children of Philadelphia face everyday. What children, CHILDREN, are regularly encountering. Gun violence, drug presence, poverty levels, housing inadequacies, domestic violence, underemployment, tragic loss, social isolation, inconsistent and inadequate systems, foster care, homelessness, abuse, suicidal ideation, child welfare systems that

ultimately have few solutions, CRCs that are overrun and understaffed, partial programs and mental health agencies with waitlists, inadequate collaboration, and inconsistent continuity of care. Students in and out of school, foster care, without enough food on the table, and unable to walk to the rec center because there could be another drive-by. It's hearing - "my dad died... my sister was shot... we got evicted again, I don't know where we're staying next... my step-dad jumped me last night... my mom lost her job... my mom let him back in the house, even after I told her what he did to me... I haven't seen my mom in 2 years since leaving El Salvador... I don't know English and no one here can talk to me... the judge said it's either foster care or the Juvenile Justice Center..."

Trauma is so constant in our city that we begin to regard it as normal. But it is not normal. It literally changes the nervous system, the chemistry of the brain. When the brains and bodies of our students are in a constant state of trauma response, they are attuned to surviving, not thriving. Student hypervigilance looks like inattentiveness, anxiety looks like hyperactivity, depression looks like truancy. We mistake survival skills for learning and behavioral deficiencies. And the support systems we have at our disposal come up short-handed with month-long waitlists and inadequate staffing.

Despite this, the children of Philadelphia persevere but not without consequence. Some keep moving forward, a lot can't and a lot don't. Make no mistake - their perseverance is admirable and inspiring but the resilience of a child shouldn't be necessary and it certainly shouldn't be considered enough.

I believe, with my whole heart, that mental health is a basic human right. Mental health is health. And all children - in all zipcodes - have the right to high quality access and opportunity to promote their mental health. Currently, that's not how our systems operate and our children need more. More School Counselors. School Counselors to know more kids - to know their stories, hear their concerns - to know families and connect them with resources. To coach families through the maze of health systems - to collaborate and consult with outside supports - to spend time connecting

and collaborating, ensuring best possible outcomes for students - to teach staff and students about trauma response, trauma-informed practices, coping, and problem solving. More School Counselors to normalize mental health, destigmatize struggles, to advocate for healthy, thriving, and fair systems - to have enough time to run effective groups without being pulled into attendance tasks, the coverage schedule, or lunch duty - to be able to turn off our walkie so we can have uninterrupted time with a student - and fully trust that we can turn our walkie off because someone else's is on - when we are the only life line for student mental health we are NOT PROVIDING SAFE SPACES for anyone. Students need intentional, preventative and responsive care and we simply don't have enough School Counselors.

Our children need more. More high quality mental health agencies - wait lists are too long, referral processes are too complicated, and agencies are too understaffed. We need more people in those agencies because we need less convoluted processes, more collaboration and communication, and easier, smoother continuity of care. Our children deserve it.

Lastly, we need to acknowledge that it's not only our students but our staff that is traumatized - we are in toxic stress all of the time. We need not only enough staff but HEALTHY staff - this includes providing safe spaces for STAFF. We need a staff care team in every building - a Network of Neighbors team for every school - a safe place to process the vicarious trauma, the secondary trauma, the toxic stress. Where do we have to go when we learn a parent was lost to gun violence? Where do we go when students get caught up in drugs, keep running away from home, and become another missing persons post on social media? Where do we go when we see a former student was shot and killed? Where do we go when a student tells us they've been getting inappropriately touched for years by mom's boyfriend? Where do we go with the fire that burns in us, with the tears that well behind our eyes, the emotional exhaustion that makes us question why we do this work? Staff need intentional, preventative and responsive care or we're going to keep losing educators.

There's no way for me to summarize the impact of trauma on our city, and our children in particular. It would take you working alongside us - day in and day out - to fully grasp the layers and intricacies at play as well as the toll trauma takes on all of us.

I don't see everything - I've been one School Counselor for 500 students... there's no way I see it all. There are traumas unknown and hurts unaddressed. We need more.

What do you think of when you hear the term "the youth of Philadelphia"? Until the first image you see in response to that phrase includes healthy, thriving children, I believe we will continue to be underfunded because our children will never be truly seen. We are not a throw away city. If I-95 can burn down and be re-built within weeks - I have to believe there's money out there - we just need to get on the priority list. A city that's been burning in trauma can be rebuilt too.

Basic Education Funding Commission

September 14, 2023

Philadelphia

Hi, everyone. Good afternoon. I am Fatoumata Sidibe, a senior at William Bodine High School for International Affairs.

I've had a diverse upbringing when it comes to education, I've been blessed to experience different schools with each its own culture, from a college prep-charter, to a quaker school, and then an Islamic education school. I felt like my childhood education was compacted into one when I heard stories about Bodine, I felt that it was the right fit for me.

And don't get me wrong it's not because of our quaint and worn-down converted elementary school building that opened in 1924, and will soon turn 100 years old, it's the people that contributed to its culture and are helping bring it back to life.

I love to learn and I was excited to start ninth grade, and experience a new atmosphere. But, unfortunately, the pandemic took place causing me and my new classmates to be retained behind little boxes engaging over a screen.

There has been a difficult adjustment to say the least, going back into the school building, coming from the pandemic, and having to face the violence around the city, too.

These events definitely took a toll on students' mental health, and I know a majority of us were unprepared for going back to school.

My classmates and I usually leave the house before light just so we can make the train on time; then, we often move our seats because of the second-hand smoke we're

exposed to; and then going down the terminal steps we have to dodge past people blocking the walkway with a needles in their arm – walking past another pile of needles; and, finally, making it to class, just on time.

We are then required to fully engage and be present while hoping that our environment outside will not show up in our work. We're required to invest so much time with little effort given back to us with support for our success. We don't even have a library, or a cafeteria. Two bare minimum things that kids need to get through the day. We shouldn't have to go through so much just to get an underfunded education.

My school would definitely benefit from having a library, with a librarian; a cafeteria, cleaner bathrooms; an adequate gym, and just overall, fundamental support.

Testimony Presented to the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission

By Donna Cooper, Executive Director, Children First

September 14, 2023

The evidence presented in the historic *William Penn v Commonwealth* litigation demonstrates that the legislature and governor failed to meet the constitutional obligation to provide a thorough and efficient system of funding public education. The judge, a Republican-appointed judge at that, found that the method used to fund education grossly distorts educational opportunity across the state's 500 districts.

Your predecessor, the Basic Education Funding Commission of 2015, considered options and proposed a sound school funding formula for the allocation of new state basic education funds. That formula has helped address the core issue of the lawsuit. However, by applying the formula to only 34% of the funds, the data shows that the state has still failed solve the distortions found in the case.

One vehicle for reducing the total amount needed to close he school funding gap is to adopt a practice that has enjoyed bipartisan support in Pennsylvania and many other states known as adequacy targets for state funding level for each school district. A Republican House and Senate codified this approach in 2007 when it adopted a multi-year funding model to close the shortfall identified by the 2006 Costing Out Study. Since the legislature abandoned that approach in 2011, there is a significant shortfall, documented through Matt Kelly's research. Kelly's data, relying on the PA School Funding Formula adopted by this Commission identified a \$6.2 billion funding gap that urgently needs to be closed.

The 2015 Commission proposed a sound formula that you can use to establish the adequacy targets. I strongly recommend that these targets rely on the current fair funding formula weights because they are sound and do a good job of measuring the relative needs of students and local taxpayer's ability to meet those needs.

Today's hearing is focused on the intersection of school funding and student mental health so that you can consider what the Commonwealth can and should do with respect to school funding to make sure public schools have the resources needed to help students learn while coping with the aftermath of social isolation, grief and loss from the COVID pandemic, as well as other present-day traumas and adversities associated with opioid abuse, violence, and the pervasive impact of social media.

The scale of mental health suffering among our children is staggering. The Surgeon General's *Protecting Youth Mental Health Report* issued in 2021 found:

- From 2009 to 2019, the proportion of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%; the share seriously considering attempting suicide increased by 36%; and the share creating a suicide plan increased by 44%.
- Early estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics suggest there were tragically more than 6,600 deaths by suicide among the 10-24 age group in 2020, making suicide the second leading cause of death behind gun violence for children.¹

In PA, the data is equally troubling and especially confounding. Comparing the data from the 2021 Pennsylvania Youth Survey for youth living in the 20 counties with the highest spending school districts in the state and those living in the 20 counties with lowest spending districts included in the Level Up Formula (the list of districts is on the last page of this testimony), youth from wealthy and low-wealth communities suffer from nearly the same rates of general anxiety as well as more intensive issues of suicidal thoughts. Specifically in both high-wealth and low-wealth districts the data shows:

- 41% of students reported feeling sad or depressed most of the time.
- Almost 19% of students reported intentionally harming themselves.
- 16% of students planned their suicide and 12% attempted to take their life.

Although students from low-wealth and higher-wealth school districts share these extremely troubling mental health challenges, the data shows a stark difference in the mental health resources between these two types of districts. The top 20 highest-spending districts in the state spend nearly 68% more on student support services than the 20 lowest-spending districts, those currently receiving the Level Up supplement. Specifically, the highest spending districts reporting spending:

- 38% more for school-based psychological services.
- 43% more for school health services.
- 72% more for school nurses.
- 59% more for guidance counselors.

Keep in mind that in these higher spending communities, most students are likely to be privately insured and may have parents who can afford additional support for their students outside of school. Clearly that's in stark contrast with the students in the low-wealth Level Up districts where 77.5% of the students are low-income and likely to be insured by Medicaid and CHIP and, as a result, languish for months or years on long waiting lists for mental health services, or where family budgets are too tight to pay out-of-pocket for behavioral health services, making school-based mental health supports all the more essential.

There are a few other telling differences among these two cohorts of school. The lowest-wealth schools educate six times as many students as their higher spending counterparts, the share of Black students is three times higher, and the share of Hispanic students is seven times higher than the students attending the 20 highest spending schools. Thirty-two percent more of students in the lowest spending Level Up districts are low-income than the students attending the higher wealth schools. Given the demographics of the student population in low-wealth districts, the disparity in student support services for mental health is alarming.

The combination of the pervasiveness of the mental health challenges, the comparative shortage of resources to meet the needs of a much larger share of students who are considerably poorer and more diverse leads to unsurprising, yet unfortunate, outcomes in these schools.

The under-resourced schools have higher levels of reported student incidents and out-of-school suspensions for disruption compared to the highest spending districts.

- Violent incidents are 40% higher.
- Out-of-school suspensions are 75% higher.
- Violence-related out-of-school suspensions are 100% higher.

Please note that the overwhelming share of students with mental health challenges are not causing disruptions; they are suffering and showing up for school hoping that the adults in their schools will reach out and help them.

There is nothing unique about the students attending the lowest spending districts in the state. If they were afforded the same essential school-based supports as their higher wealth counterparts there is every reason to believe that their behaviors would moderate, and they could more readily focus on school work.

Children First has held several symposiums where students told us what they need:

1. Schools need mental health services on site, with skilled professionals that know how to help kids.
2. Schools must be places where mental health first aid is practiced by all adults and students.
3. Schools can be improved by teaching students mental health coping skills so they can learn.
4. Teachers should be trained in mental health basics and brain development so they can reinforce positive coping skills and ensure students are aided in de-escalating their feelings or situations.
5. Counseling/therapeutic services must honor a student's racial and cultural identity and tap all the assets in that student's life to help them mentally heal.
6. Before and after school programs where youth can form relationships with caring adults can boost student mental well-being.
7. Schools can be trauma-informed and trauma-responsive places that meet students where they are and provide safe adults to support them in navigating their mental and emotional wellness.

In these symposiums we heard from students in Oregon, Washington, and Texas who shared extraordinary experiences attending schools where mental health is front and center. The administrators of these schools had resources at their disposal to help students and staff establish school-based mental health practices standards and provide students with mental health supports from competent and caring teachers and mental health professionals. And, fortunately for the students in these states, state revenues, or in the case of Texas, where state taxes on oil and gas are sent directly to school districts, districts have significantly more state-level resources to meet the full range of needs to support student success compared to Pennsylvania.

We also introduced parents and students to the inspiring work of Dr. Shawn Ginwright who you heard from at this hearing. We are a proud partner with the School District, helping to implement the Healing Center Engagement practices. Fortunately, COVID relief funds are making this groundbreaking work with young people possible. Upper Darby is another example of a district, when given the resources, invests in youth mental health because it's so essential to student success. Like Philadelphia, they are spending a portion of COVID relief funds on a district-wide mental health initiative that trains teachers in

classroom management practices based on the principles of mental health first aid. They are also embedding school-based access to mental health services in partnership with Lakeside Services, a nationally recognized pioneer in trauma-informed youth mental health practices based only a few miles from here in North Wales.

How telling, and tragic is it that the capacity for these two low-wealth, highly diverse districts to have the resources to give their students the mental health supports needed to enable learning comes from federal relief funds from the worst pandemic in the last 100 years. This research-based work that uses the basics of brain science to help our students is the lifeline that these students need. That research points to robust school mental health programming and services which must be considered an essential cost covered by an adequate Basic Education Funding line-item.

Last week, we participated in a full day of training for 300 school nurses who work in private, charter, and public high schools. These nurses are looking for help meeting the mental health needs of children in their schools.

We don't need new school governance models or new private school options for these students because, sadly, when it comes to kids with mental health challenges, there is ample data to show that these are not the students most charter and private schools want to enroll, and they are the students who are most often counseled out of these schools at the urging of their charter or private school administrators.

This Commission must recommend robust adequacy funding targets for each district and the appropriation needed to fairly reach those targets over three to five years. By doing so, low-wealth school districts will be able to deliver instruction and mental health services in ways that follow the science and the need and give our students the opportunity and capacity to learn.

Lowest Spending per Student Level Up Districts – SY 22

School District	County
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia
Reading SD	Berks
Allentown City SD	Lehigh
York City SD	York
Erie City SD	Erie
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin
Scranton SD	Lackawanna
Lancaster SD	Lancaster
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware
Upper Darby SD	Delaware
Hazleton Area SD	Luzerne
Wilkes-Barre Area SD	Luzerne
Bethlehem Area SD	Northampton
Lebanon SD	Lebanon
Norristown Area SD	Montgomery
Greater Johnstown SD	Cambria
William Penn SD	Delaware
McKeesport Area SD	Allegheny
Southeast Delco SD	Delaware
Altoona Area SD	Blair

Highest Spending per Student School Districts – SY 22

School District	County
Upper Merion Area SD	Montgomery
Lewisburg Area SD	Union
Lower Merion SD	Montgomery
Commodore Perry SD	Mercer
Forest Area SD	Forest
Moshannon Valley SD	Clearfield
Upper St. Clair SD	Allegheny
New Hope-Solebury SD	Bucks
Farrell Area SD	Mercer
Smethport Area SD	McKean
Union SD	Clarion
Palisades SD	Bucks
Old Forge SD	Lackawanna
Kutztown Area SD	Berks
Wallenpaupack Area SD	Pike
Cornell SD	Allegheny
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny
Northern Potter SD	Potter
Pottsgrove SD	Montgomery
Girard SD	Erie

Pennsylvania Youth Survey 2021: Average Share of Responses to Questions on Sleep, Grief, and Other Stressful Events

Sleep, Grief, and Stressful Events	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
On average, sleeping less than 7 hours a night on school nights	37.3%	38.2%
Felt tired or sleepy during the day "every day" or "several times" during the past two weeks	63.7%	64.5%
Has experienced death of a friend or family member in the past year	38.7%	39.0%
Worried about running out of food one or more times in the past year	10.4%	10.0%
Skipped a meal because of family finances one or more times in the past year	5.3%	5.3%

Pennsylvania Youth Survey 2021: Average Share of Responses to Questions on Mental Health Concerns and Suicide Risks

Mental Health Concerns & Suicide Risks	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
Self-harm (e.g. cutting, scraping, burning) in the past 12 months	18.5%	18.7%
Felt depressed or sad MOST days in the past 12 months	41.5%	41.7%
Sometimes I think that life is not worth it	28.6%	28.9%
At times, I think I am no good at all	39.2%	39.7%
All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure	26.8%	27.3%
So sad stopped doing usual activities	31.3%	31.6%
Seriously considered suicide	20.2%	19.3%
Planned suicide	16.2%	15.6%
Attempted suicide	12.9%	11.4%
Needed medical treatment for suicide attempt	3.6%	2.3%

**Average Student Support Expenditures per Average Daily
Membership in Comparison Districts**

Expenditure	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
Guidance Services per ADM	\$310.88	\$495.57
Psychological Services per ADM	\$97.92	\$134.76
Social Work Services per ADM	\$103.42	\$74.11
Pupil Health per ADM	\$220.21	\$315.67
Nursing Services per ADM	\$141.55	\$243.53
Total Support Services per ADM	\$4,801.21	\$8,054.09

Student Enrollment in Comparison Districts

Enrollment	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
Average Total Enrollment	13,857	2,794
Average American Indian / Alaskan Native Share	0.1%	0.0%
Average Asian Share	2.6%	3.0%
Average Black or African American Share	33.7%	9.6%
Average Hispanic Share	34.9%	5.6%
Average Multi-racial Share	5.8%	5.3%
Average Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Share	0.0%	0.0%
Average White Share	22.7%	75.6%
Average Low Income Share	77.5%	45.8%

Average Share of Infractions/Incidents of Comparison Districts

Incident Type	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
Average Total Share of Incidents	7.0%	5.8%
Average Drugs & Alcohol Related Incidents	0.4%	0.3%
Average Weapons Related Incidents	0.3%	0.2%
Average Violence Related Incidents	4.7%	3.4%

Average Share of Out of School (OOS) Suspensions of Comparison Districts

Out of School (OOS) Suspension Type	Top 20 School Districts by Level Up Subsidy	Top 20 School Districts by Total Expenditures per ADM
Average Total Share of OOS Suspensions	5.0%	2.8%
Average Drugs & Alcohol Related OOS Suspensions	0.4%	0.2%
Average Weapons Related OOS Suspensions	0.2%	0.1%
Average Violence Related OOS Suspensions	3.4%	1.7%

ⁱ Date extracted from the Surgeon General Report, Protecting Youth Mental Health, 2021, data sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends Report: 2009-2019. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/dear_colleague/2020/dcl-102320-YRBS-2009-2019-report.html, and Kalb, L. G., Stapp, E. K., Ballard, E. D., Holingue, C., Keefer, A., & Riley, A. (2019). Trends in Psychiatric Emergency Department Visits Among Youth and Young Adults in the US. *Pediatrics*, 143(4), e20182192. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2192>, and Curtin, S. C. (2020). State suicide rates among adolescents and young adults aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018. *National Vital Statistics Reports*; vol 69 no 11. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, and Curtin, S. C., Hedegaard, H., Ahmad, F. B. (2021). Provisional numbers and rates of suicide by month and demographic characteristics: United States, 2020. *Vital Statistics Rapid Release*; no 16. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.



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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE BASIC EDUCATION FUNDING COMMISSION

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

SEPTEMBER 14, 2023

To the members of the Commission, Representative Sturla and Senator Phillips-Hill, Chairs, thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today and to further submit the written testimony of the members of the Trauma Informed Education Coalition concerning resources needed to address the impact of trauma and mental health on school climate and student learning.

I am Dr. Joan Evelyn Duvall-Flynn, Chair of the Trauma Informed Education Coalition (TIEC). TIEC is a diverse collaboration of lay membership and professionals from the fields of education, counseling, psychology, human development, and social work. We plan and conduct professional development training concerning trauma and its ramifications for educators and other entities that serve children and their families.

This opportunity is precious to us. Eight years ago, working with the NAACP State Conference, we brought the issue of trauma to the first iteration of this committee. Since that time, much has been researched and written on the issue and it is now commonly understood and accepted that trauma is pervasive among our young, and that schools must have the resources to address it.

As we have come to know much about each of you as legislators and commission members through your web sites and sponsored or supported bills, we feel assured that you understand the drastic needs of basic education as our students face challenges and situations new to society.

How are our children? They are wounded, frightened, anxious, and stressed; and they are sitting in classrooms across the commonwealth in the care of individuals who have chosen to serve society in roles such as school administrators, classroom teachers, nurses, social workers, and other staff supporters.

Members of this commission understand that trauma refers to the effect an event has on an individual who has an overwhelming experience. Because you know that, some of you here are working on legislation that concerns for example: social media, drug abuse, human trafficking, the complexities faced by LGBTQ students, internet access and the impact a meaningful education has on our nation's global interdependency.

Administrative Team: Chair: Dr. Joan Evelyn Duvall-Flynn, Treasurer: Mrs. Michelle Shields
Dr. Christopher Barnes, Mr. Jonathan Flynn, Ms. Jeanette Oswald



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Currently, the issue before the committee is this. The Commonwealth Court decreed on February 7, 2021, that the present approach to funding our schools has no rational basis and does not serve the interests of the commonwealth. No moral, ethical, logical, or mathematic explanation could make sense of the school funding system. As a result, that sandcastle, as was destined, has been washed away by the tide of justice.

This commission has been given an immense responsibility and a significant moral charge. You have the privilege to create a new vision of education in Pennsylvania – a system that is more positive, more efficient - more just - to create a new mission for school funding.

It is time for a new beginning. This commission now must start from scratch and design a system that provides equal protection under law for each child in Pennsylvania. It is your charge to rebuild – to espouse an ethos concerning the young over whose lives the legislature holds virtually boundaryless power.

So, the foundational questions before the Committee emerge: What are your collective attitudes and beliefs about the value of each child living in Pennsylvania? What is the worth of each child's potential? What is your collective philosophy on the purpose of education?

Thank you for taking on the task. Your work will change the history of Pennsylvania. TIECs specific recommendations are submitted in our written testimony. We are at the service of the Commission to support your efforts in any way we can. We are happy to address any questions you may have.



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TRAUMA INFORMED EDUCATION COALITION (TIEC}

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO

THE BASIC EDUCATION COMMISSION CONCERNING:

**RESOURCES NEEDED TO ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND MENTAL
HEALTH ON SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STUDENT LEARNING**

Much has been written and multi-millions of dollars have been spent since the issue of trauma as an impediment to school performance was brought to the attention of the education community nationwide.

In the interest of the Commission's time and efforts, TIEC will be concise and keep its recommendations focused on the topic as assigned to us. We remind the Commission as it works to recreate and design a Basic Education Funding Framework that the world has agreements concerning children and young people as espoused in and to wit are seen as:

In the interest of the Commission's time and efforts, TIEC will be concise and keep its recommendations focused on the topic as assigned to us. We remind the Commission as it works to rebuild the Basic Education Funding Framework that the world has agreements concerning children and young people as espoused in [Convention on the Rights of the Child text | UNICEF](#) and with particular attention to Article 29 as pertains to education; and that the Commissions recognize the relevance of the components of this document to the issue of trauma.

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;

(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;

(c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;



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(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;

(e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.

Regarding School Climate:

We find the work of the National School Climate Center to be a viable resource that clarifies and gives structure to the concept. [What is School Climate and Why is it Important? - National School Climate Center](#) (NSCC).

This source is based on current research and best thought. To quote the Center, “A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This definition posits that there are “five major areas that school climate assessment needs to include: **Safety, Interpersonal Relationships, Social Media, Teaching and Learning and the Institutional environment.**”

The center maintains that:

“School climate is the holistic context of the life, vigor and quality of the social connectedness, physical elements, and supportive practices that nurture inclusion and safeness. In order to invest in school climate, one must analyze how his or her individual actions and behaviors contribute to the collective feeling of the school. Students, educators, support staff, families and the community are all key affiliations in co-creating an engaging and inclusive school climate.”

These thoughts are further explicated at: [School Climate Practice - National School Climate Center](#). TIEC highly recommends a thorough review of the Center’s writings on practice to be found on this site.



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Regarding Student Learning:

As well, much has been written on the impact of trauma on student learning. We hold that our testimony with the NAACP State Conference in March of 2015 remains relevant and will be attached as an addendum. It clearly espouses the need for certain school resources such as art, music and physical education as mitigating school experiences that assist traumatized children to regulate their emotions.

We offer also [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach \(nctsn.org\)](http://nctsn.org) and SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach | Youth.gov which provide the most far reaching compilation of thought on what is needed for a trauma informed system that we can find. It speaks to both mental health and trauma. The elements of this site reflect TIEC's position on a trauma informed approach.

The six principles:

- Safety: ensuring physical and emotional safety for people who have experienced trauma
- Trustworthiness and transparency: being clear and honest about the purpose, process, and expectations of care.
- Peer support: providing opportunities for mutual support and learning among people with lived experience of trauma.
- Collaboration and mutuality: sharing power and responsibility with people who receive and provide care.
- Empowerment, voice, and choice: respecting and promoting the autonomy and strengths of people who have experienced trauma.
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues: acknowledging and addressing the impact of cultural, historical, and gender factors on trauma and recovery.

can be addressed through such programs as Comer School Development,

[Comer School Development Program | UW College of Education](#); [Comer School Development Program celebrates 50 years of work in education | YaleNews](#); [Making Schools Work with Hedrick Smith . School-By-School Reform . Comer School Development Program | PBS](#).



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Further relevant resources from SAMSHA pertain to 10 elements of organizational development. TIEC suggest this material as salient to the commission's work on resources pertaining to climate and student learning. According to SAMSHA,

“While it is recognized that not all public institutions and service sectors attend to trauma as an aspect of how they conduct business, understanding the role of trauma and a trauma-informed approach may help them meet their goals and objectives. Organizations, across service-sectors and systems, are encouraged to examine how a trauma-informed approach will benefit all stakeholders; to conduct a trauma-informed organizational assessment and change process; and to involve clients and staff at all levels in the organizational development process.” SAMSHA put forth the following 10 organizational implementational domains.

[TIC in Organizations: Ten Implementation Domains - TIC Training Center \(traumainformedcaretraining.com\)](#)

1. GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP:

The leadership and governance of the organization support and invest in implementing and sustaining a trauma-informed approach. There is an identified point of responsibility within the organization to lead and oversee this work and peer voices are included.

2. POLICY:

There are written policies and protocols establishing a trauma-informed approach as an essential part of the organizational mission. Organizational procedures and cross-agency protocols reflect trauma-informed principles.

3. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION:

The organization ensures that the physical environment promotes a sense of safety.

4. ENGAGEMENT & INVOLVEMENT:

People in recovery, trauma survivors, consumers, and family members receiving services have significant involvement, voice, and meaningful choice at all levels and in all areas of organizational functioning (e.g., program design, implementation, service delivery, quality assurance, cultural competence, access to trauma-informed peer support, workforce development, and evaluation).

Chair: Dr. Joan Evelyn Duvall-Flynn . Treasurer: Mrs. Michelle Shields



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TIEC is grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the work of the Commission.

5. CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Collaboration across sectors is built on a shared understanding of trauma and principles of a trauma-informed approach. While a trauma focus is not the stated mission of different service sectors, understanding how trauma impacts those served and integrating this knowledge across service sectors is critical.

6. SCREENING, ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT SERVICES:

Interventions are based on the best available empirical evidence and science, are culturally appropriate, and reflect principles of a trauma-informed approach. Trauma screening and assessment are an essential part of the work. Trauma-specific interventions are acceptable, effective, and available for individuals and families seeking services. When trauma-specific services are not available within the organization, there is a trusted, effective referral system in place that facilitates connecting individuals with appropriate trauma treatment.

7. TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:

Continuous training on trauma, peer support, and how to respond to trauma is available for all staff. A human resource system incorporates trauma-informed principles in hiring, supervision, and staff evaluation; procedures are in place to support staff with trauma histories and/or those experiencing significant secondary traumatic stress from exposure to highly stressful material.

8. PROGRESS MONITORING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE:

There is ongoing assessment, tracking, and monitoring of trauma-informed principles and effective use of evidence-based and trauma-specific screening, assessments, and treatment.

9. FINANCING:

Financing structures are designed to support a trauma-informed approach which includes resources for staff training, development of appropriate facilities, establishment of peer support, and evidence-supported trauma screening, assessment, services, and interventions.

10. EVALUATION:

Chair: Dr. Joan Evelyn Duvall-Flynn . Treasurer: Mrs. Michelle Shields



TRAUMA INFORMED EDUCATION COALITION (TIEC)

Teach - Innovate - Educate - Consult

132 FOX VALLEY LANE - GLEN MILLS, PA 19342

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Measures and evaluation designs used to evaluate service or program implementation and effectiveness reflect an understanding of trauma and appropriate trauma-research instruments.

ADDENDUM 1: Pertains to implementation domain 6

**High-risk Factors and Warning Signs for Student Trauma Screening
TIEC © 2016**

These are listed alphabetically so as not to indicate a hierarchy of importance.

Student Data Collection:

Look at student demographics -

Adult care giver: age and level of education

Alcohol/Drug Activity

Attendance – on-going trend

Bullying – as perpetrator or victim

DHS involvement

Discipline Referrals/ Court involvement

Domestic Violence

Frequent visits to the nurse

Gender

Gender Identity Conflict

History of death exposure or significant loss

Home/ Transience

Inconsistency between test scores and other
intelligence indicators i.e. vocabulary

Obvious low self esteem

Persistent expression of negative thoughts

Previous ADHD Diagnosis or symptoms

Previous behavioral health involvement

Progress Reports

Regression in Language

Self-mutilation

Sexual Aggression

Sexualized Affect

Social Economic Status

Social Precociousness

Stuttering/ slow language development

Violence exposure



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ADDENDUM 2: Pertains to Implementation domain 1

Teachers are a first line of defense when bad things are happening in a school-aged child's life. They are uniquely positioned to observe the physical, psychological, and emotional state of their students. Moreover, the school is the community institution with the capacity to assess the needs of a young person and effectively intervene on her or his behalf. That is why, after four years of studying the issue of trauma as an impediment to school performance, in 2014, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) passed a resolution calling for a trauma informed education systems across the United States. That is also why the Trauma Informed Education Coalition (TIEC) was formed; and why together, NAACP and TIEC have worked at both the state and national level for policy in this area.

Through our joint advocacy, NAACP and TIEC have made some progress. The need for the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education to develop protocols to address trauma as an impediment to school performance is included in the PA Basic Education Funding Formula Commission's recommendations of 2015. In addition, funds are included in the current iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now referred to as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

NAACP and TIEC are well aware that ultimately each classroom is the endpoint of a thread woven into a complex fabric – a part of an organized system designed through laws, regulations, protocols, and labor agreements. No one member of this system operates in a vacuum. No superintendent, building administrator, or teacher can actualize a "trauma informed approach" without the sanction and support of the system.

To have the *trauma informed education system* necessary for school effectiveness today, Chief School Officers, local education agencies, and building leaders must create, maintain and monitor a clear, well-defined approach designed to address this need.

7 System-wide Practices to Mitigate the Impact of Trauma in the School Setting

- A systematic flow of communication among the system, its educators, staff, and students
- A well-defined parent involvement / community support plan
- A formalized mentoring program
- Programmed guidance groups i.e. grief groups, anger management groups, social skills groups.
- A diversion plan for disciplinary action
- A screening process for trauma
- A systematic, mental health referral plan



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To be clear, in our vision of a *trauma informed education system*, neither NAACP nor TIEC suggests that teachers become therapists for children who face adversity. Rather, the call is for teachers, administrators, and school staff to view students through an informed lens that recognizes the pervasiveness of childhood trauma and that triggers their awareness when signs and symptoms of trauma signal the need for interventions. We also see the need for educators to understand the types of interventions known to be non-productive and that, in fact, exacerbate negative outcomes.

Both NAACP and TIEC realize that specific and systematic professional development is essential for educators and school staff in order to build the professional capacity required to have a trauma informed education system. Because school personnel and student populations change constantly, we hold that this training must be school wide, all inclusive, sustained and on-going.

7 Components of Understanding to Include in Professional Development for Educators and School Staff

- A clear and common definition of trauma
- An awareness of the adverse experiences that tend to result in trauma
- The continuum of trauma response and the role of resilience in individual reactions to traumatic experiences
- How trauma displays as an impediment to academic achievement
- How trauma displays as an impediment to social participation
- The essential needs of traumatized students
- The power of interpersonal relationships

References

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Guthrie, J. W., & Reed, R. J., (1991) *Educational Administration and Policy (2nd ed.)*, Allen and Bacon.

Grant Publication (no date) *Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court*. Stoneleigh Foundation.

Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Missouri Department of Mental Health, & National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare (2012) *Youth Mental Health First Aid: USA for Adults Assisting Young People*.



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ADDENDUM 3: Pertaining to Additional Resources

[Calls to Action: Federal Legislation Supporting Cross-Sector Community Coalitions \(ctipp.org\)](http://ctipp.org)

[Policies - Hopeful Futures Campaign](#)

[tps://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/youth-courts-and-their-educational-value-an-examination-of-youth-courts-in-chester-pennsyl](https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/youth-courts-and-their-educational-value-an-examination-of-youth-courts-in-chester-pennsyl)

Material on Youth Courts. TIEC believes this approach to school discipline will end the school to prison pipeline.

<https://www.delcotimes.com/2018/02/04/students-rule-in-upper-darby-youth-court-class/>

Darby School District. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2ZbR_515R8 It is five minutes long.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQpgxMt35OE> It is twelve minutes long.

Webinar #2 https://1drv.ms/v/s!AmcDoI8n1K3Jh9gJoO-3AjY_qQRA0Q?e=X6bHTL

Webinar #3 <https://1drv.ms/v/s!AmcDoI8n1K3Jh9skscL3QP10dPyzQ?e=Gg1Yp4>

Materials pertaining to Local Control of School Funding

[Local Control Funding Formula Overview - Local Control Funding Formula \(CA Dept of Education\)](#)

September 14, 2023

Good Afternoon esteemed members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity. I would like to provide you with a comprehensive overview of the Philadelphia Healthy & Safe Schools program, PHASeS, and the significant impact it has made on the well-being of our communities, especially our children. PHASeS is dedicated to trauma sensitivity and has been instrumental in enhancing school-community wellness and safety while improving attendance and retention through trauma-sensitive approaches. Let's delve deeper into the evidence and success stories that underscore the importance of this program.

Background and Purpose

The Philadelphia Healthy and Safe Schools (PHASeS) Trauma Program is a response to the growing recognition of trauma's significant impact on students within educational settings. Research reveals that a substantial number of students have encountered various forms of trauma, which can hinder their academic success and overall well-being. The purpose of PHASeS is to develop a holistic and trauma-informed approach to address these challenges and provide students with the necessary support to thrive.

Program Overview

The PHASeS Trauma Program is a comprehensive initiative aimed at transforming the educational environment into a safe and nurturing space for all students. By integrating trauma-informed practices, comprehensive student support, and active community engagement, the program seeks to create an educational ecosystem that promotes healing, resilience, and academic success. Our program prioritizes a collaborative approach that involves students, families, staff, and the broader community to collectively build a culture of understanding, empathy, and growth.

Impact on Wellness and Safety

Research evaluations conducted within schools participating in the PHASeS program has shown a tangible improvement in school climate and a sense of wellness among students and staff. The program's trauma-sensitive approaches have contributed to a safer and more nurturing environment, promoting overall well-being.

Early data indicates that schools implementing PHASeS have experienced improved attendance rates, reduced behavioral issues, and a more positive perception of school life quality among both students and staff. These findings highlight the practical benefits of trauma sensitivity in educational settings.

Building Relationships

PHASeS places a strong emphasis on building relationships within trauma-sensitive schools and communities. Through the provision of trauma-sensitive supportive services, teachers and school-based staff are better equipped to assist students in coping with trauma and stress. This relational approach has resulted in improved teacher-student connections and a more conducive learning environment.

Feedback from educators participating in the program underscores the positive impact of these relationships. Teachers have reported a heightened sense of empathy, active listening skills, and a greater ability to address students' emotional needs, all of which contribute to a more nurturing educational experience.

Collaboration with Temple University

PHASeS' collaboration with Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine Center for Urban Bioethics enriches the program with expertise, resources, and a commitment to effecting lasting change. This partnership has been instrumental in advancing trauma-informed practices in schools and communities.

Research conducted in collaboration with Temple University has demonstrated the efficacy of trauma-sensitive strategies in improving student well-being and academic outcomes. These findings emphasize the value of continued investment in programs like PHASeS.

Core Language and Practices

PHASeS employs a comprehensive set of trauma-related concepts and practices that have been carefully integrated into school culture. These include trauma awareness, active listening, safety plans, resilience-building, and mindfulness.

Teachers and school staff who have undergone PHASeS training have reported feeling more equipped to handle students' emotional needs, resulting in improved classroom management, student engagement, and staff well-being.

Impact on Specific Schools

In schools with marginalized communities like Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary, Kenderton Elementary, and WD Kelley, PHASeS has made a significant impact on students, staff, and the broader community. Through its services and support, these schools have seen a reduction in behavioral incidents and an increase in student attendance and engagement.

Testimonials from school counselors, principals, and teachers at these institutions attest to the transformative power of trauma-informed practices. These stories underscore the real-world impact that PHASeS has had on our most vulnerable communities.

Empowering Parents and Staff

PHASeS' commitment to empowering parents through workshops and providing essential training to school staff on de-escalation techniques and self-care is critical to its success. These initiatives have helped bridge the gap between schools and families, creating a more supportive network for students.

The emphasis on staff well-being has contributed to reduced burnout rates and increased job satisfaction among educators. Research indicates that teacher satisfaction is correlated with improved student achievement, making these efforts integral to enhancing academic outcomes. (Banerjee et al., 2017)

The Necessity of Trauma-Informed Practices

The data supports the argument that trauma-informed practices are not a luxury but a necessity in today's schools. Teacher burnout is associated with reduced academic achievement and student motivation, which underscores the importance of investing in strategies that promote teacher well-being. (Madigan and Kim, 2021)

Studies have shown that attitudes related to trauma-informed care are positively correlated with compassion satisfaction and negatively correlated with compassion fatigue. Increasing awareness of trauma and trauma-informed strategies leads to decreased burnout and increased job satisfaction among school staff. (Blomeke et al., 2017; Klassen and Chiu, 2011)

Call to Action

I urge this Committee to consider the compelling evidence presented here and the invaluable contributions of PHASeS to our schools and communities. Investing in trauma-informed practices is investing in the future of our communities, and the time to act is now.

Let us unite in support of Philadelphia youth, champion this vision, and ensure that our children have the safe, nurturing, and empowering educational environments they deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Mary Beth Hays, LSW

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Dr. Shawn Ginwright's Testimony
Basic Education Funding Commission
September 14, 2023

Good afternoon, members of the Basic Education Funding Commission.

My name is Dr. Shawn Ginwright, and I hold the Jerome T. Murphy Endowed Chair of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I am also the Co-Founder and CEO of Flourish Agenda, a national consulting firm that provides professional development and training to educators focused on trauma and healing.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the commission today.

It is perhaps the best of times and the worst of times for Pennsylvania Public Schools. Pennsylvania is showing signs of recovery from the dramatic impact of COVID.

- Rising Graduation Rates: Pennsylvania has witnessed a steady increase in high school graduation rates over the past decade.
- STEM Education Advancements: Schools across Pennsylvania are making remarkable strides in promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education.
- Career and Technical Education (CTE) Success: CTE programs in Pennsylvania are thriving, offering students practical skills and pathways to well-paying careers.

However, like many states in this country, Pennsylvania continues to struggle with the pervasive trauma exposure among students, particularly students of color. Traumatic experiences, whether due to violence, poverty, or other adverse circumstances, can have profound and lasting effects on a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. These experiences can hinder their ability to learn, form healthy relationships, and thrive in school.

Nationally, research suggests that approximately 25% of America's children will experience at least one traumatic event by the age of 16.

Black and Latino children and youth are more likely than other groups to have traumatic experiences. It is estimated that nearly half of all students in Pennsylvania have experienced at least one traumatic event by the time they reach adulthood.

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These traumas can range from witnessing domestic violence to living in neighborhoods plagued by crime and poverty. We know from research that there are significant consequences of this trauma on our students' lives and future prospects.

Research has shown that students who have experienced trauma are more likely to struggle academically, exhibit behavioral problems, and have lower attendance rates. These challenges can lead to a cycle of academic underachievement and can severely limit their potential.

As a society, we have an urgent obligation to address the trauma that our students face and provide them with the support they need to heal and succeed.

Healing-centered engagement is a promising approach that supports the well-being of the entire ecosystem that surrounds young people's lives. Based on their unique culture and ethnic identity, healing-centered strategies surround youth, their parents, and their teachers with tools that foster and promote healing well-being.

Investing in healing-centered practices and healing resources for our students is critical and a smart investment in the future of Pennsylvania. Here are a few reasons why this investment is crucial:

- **FIRST:** Unresolved trauma can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Early healing-centered interventions and support can prevent these issues from escalating and improve overall mental health outcomes.
- **SECOND:** Traumatized students often struggle to concentrate, regulate their emotions, and form positive relationships. By providing healing-centered supports, we can help these students overcome these barriers and excel academically.
- **THIRD:** Research has shown a strong correlation between childhood trauma and involvement in the criminal justice system. By addressing trauma early, we can help break the cycle of incarceration and reduce the burden on our justice system.

In order to address this issue effectively, I urge the Basic Education Funding Commission to consider the following:

- **FIRST:** Expand access and participation in healing-centered strategies and programs: Our pilot of Camp Akili, a 4-day healing-centered summer camp, and training 150 teachers in healing-centered practices in the School District of Philadelphia can be a

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model for how Pennsylvania can lead the country in innovative and effective strategies to increase well-being and mental health access.

- **SECOND:** Increase and expand funding for healing-centered training: Allocate funds for comprehensive healing-centered and trauma-informed training for educators, school counselors, and support staff. This training will equip them with the tools to recognize and respond to trauma effectively and promote healing in neighborhoods and schools.

For example, California and other states are exploring how to expand access to Medicaid in order to increase healing opportunities and supports in the state. California is changing who is eligible and who can provide mental health interventions to expand access to Medicaid for community and peer-to-peer mental health interventions.

- **THIRD:** Invest and provide funding for Community Partnerships: Foster partnerships between schools, community organizations, and mental health providers to create a holistic system of support for students.

To conclude, Pennsylvania has the unique opportunity to become the nation's first healing-centered state. This simply means coordinating funding streams, supports, and opportunities for public systems to saturate young people with opportunities to heal and enjoy well-being, a type of well-being that most of us take for granted. By prioritizing healing-centered practices and investing in healing programs, we can forge new ground in supporting our students to reach their full potential and contribute positively to Pennsylvania's future.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to make this critical investment in the well-being of our students.



Reginald L. Streater, Esq., Board of Education President
Testimony to the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission
School District of Philadelphia
September 14, 2023

On behalf of the Board of Education, I would like to thank the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission; Representative Mike Sturla, Commission Co-Chair; Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill, Commission Co-Chair; Commission Members; and the Pennsylvania Legislature at-large and Administration for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Basic Education Funding Commission on the vitally important topic of adequate and equitable school funding.

Critical to providing students with opportunities for success is adequate and equitable funding for every school district in the Commonwealth. However, the current system of funding education in Pennsylvania shortchanges low-wealth districts like Philadelphia, which includes both district and charter schools. It has been well documented that public education in Philadelphia has been grossly underfunded. And this disinvestment in public education has had a negative impact on both the district and charter schools in Philadelphia. According to PA Schools Work, adequate state funding for Philadelphia would translate to an additional \$5,584 per student.

Earlier this year, Commonwealth Court Judge Cohn Jubelirer ruled that the current system of funding schools in Pennsylvania is unconstitutional because it results in wide disparities in spending between low-wealth and high-wealth districts. The Judge also said that the inequities required not only a redistribution of state aid but also more funding overall.

As a practicing attorney, I have had the opportunity to review the opinion, and it is clear that under the current funding formula, we have public education systems that feel separate and unequal. So we look forward to the Governor and the Legislature acting to provide a fair, adequate and predictable funding system that enables all children to meet state academic standards and does not discriminate against low-wealth districts.

At every Board of Education meeting, we hear pressing and important concerns from the public – about the need to invest in our buildings, about the need for additional staff, and the need for smaller class sizes. We share these priorities, but the current system of funding education in Pennsylvania leaves school districts like Philadelphia with the continual challenge of deciding



how to invest limited resources to meet the varying needs of our students and staff. According to an analysis by the Public Interest Law Center and the Education Law Center, the School District would need an additional \$1.14 billion annually to meet the educational needs of our students.

Additionally, the School District of Philadelphia is the only school district in the Commonwealth that cannot raise its own taxes, so the District is completely dependent on our local and state elected officials to provide the resources necessary to ensure that every student in the city has access to a quality public education that prepares them for future success. It is the School Board's responsibility to manage the financial health and sustainability of the system of public education in Philadelphia, and we are responsible for the sound allocation of limited financial resources.

Although the School District is not adequately funded, we have been good stewards of public funds and have made substantial financial progress since 2017 when the District exited the state's financial distress program. In 2018, Moody's upgraded our bond rating to investment grade for the first time since 1977. We have also had a positive fund balance for the past several years and have invested in our students by filling over 2,500 positions, adding academic programs, strengthening behavioral supports for our most at-risk students and reestablishing student activities. We also have invested in our buildings by modernizing classrooms, upgrading training equipment, making repairs and remediating environmental hazards.

That said, if the School District were fully funded, we could invest in our priority areas of: upgrading school facilities, addressing gun violence and providing incentives to help fully staff our schools. The average age of our school buildings is 73 years old; and according to a 2017 analysis of School District facilities, the district's deferred maintenance costs total \$4.5 billion. At least 85 buildings should be considered for renovation and 21 buildings should be considered for closure.

Another priority is the urgent need to decrease levels of gun violence in the city to keep our learners safe, especially as they go to and from school. While the School District has put in place measures to address safe passage to and from school, adequate state funding would enable us to invest in more programs to keep students safe when they are not in school. Such measures could include increasing safe corridors around schools and ensuring young people have safe places to go, such as libraries and rec centers, when schools are closed. Finally, because the School District is at a competitive disadvantage to recruit and retain staff compared to better-funded districts, we must invest more in recruitment and retention efforts so that our schools are fully staffed with highly qualified educators.



In addition to adequate and equitable funding, school districts must have plans that focus on student achievement, so they invest in the resources and facilities that students need to thrive. In May, the Board of Education adopted a Strategic Plan, “Accelerate Philly,” that aims to provide every learner in our School District with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes.

The Board believes that a quality education would give our learners the tools necessary to achieve self-determination, dignity, and their full potential. We believe this can be done with a laser focus on a student-centered approach to education, predicated on values such as equity, accountability, safety and respect. Goals and Guardrails, our plan to increase student achievement, has become our North Star for all decision making. It provides a framework for Board governance that focuses on racial equity, setting clear expectations for what students must know and be able to do, and rigorously monitoring progress towards achievement.

By establishing Goals and Guardrails and adopting a Strategic Plan, we have been able to align our priorities, policies and budgets so that students have the environment and resources they need to learn, thrive and succeed and eventually lead in a global society.

Over the past few years, the School District has been able to make strategic investments through the additional federal funds we received to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The District received \$1.1 billion in ARPA Federal Funding and used the funds to:

- Safely reopen schools and sustain in-person learning;
- Address students’ social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs resulting from the pandemic; and
- Maintain operations and delivery of services.

The District has been transparent about how we have spent federal funds and the investments we have made to improve student learning. Moving forward, we hope to see that school districts across the Commonwealth receive the additional funding and a redistribution of state aid, called for by Judge Cohn Jubelirer.

For years, our Board of Education has joined other school districts, families, elected officials and advocates to urge the legislature to provide a fair, adequate and predictable funding system that enables all children to meet state academic standards and reach their fullest potential. We look forward to a remedy that ensures our students, in both district and charter schools, will finally have the same opportunities as their peers in higher-resourced school districts.



We must all come together and act as a collective village for all the children in the Commonwealth to ensure that each learner has access to a quality education that empowers them to learn, achieve and reach their greatest potential in life. We appreciate your support of public education in Pennsylvania and look forward to working together in the best interest of all our learners.



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

CITY COUNCIL

Isaiah Thomas
Council Member, At-Large
City Hall, Room 330
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Good afternoon,

My name is Councilmember Isaiah Thomas and I am an At-Large member of Philadelphia City Council. Thank you to the Basic Education Funding Commission for holding this important hearing today to discuss this crucial issue. As the chair of Philadelphia City Council's Education Committee, and as a former educator myself, I feel a higher responsibility to our city's young people. I am here today to urge a total, efficient review of the Commonwealth's funding formula.

Philadelphia City Council remains a steadfast supporter of our students, and have over each of the past eight years increased the School District's funding. Year in and year out we hear from School District leadership, educators, staff, students, and families that our city's schools desperately need more money— and we listen.

Early this year, Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer released her landmark decision in the fair funding lawsuit. The decision, almost 800 pages, lays out what Philadelphians have known for a long while: the Commonwealth's funding formula is unconstitutional and blatantly limits access to opportunity for the Districts' predominantly Black and brown students.

Let me be clear: this is an equity issue. By basing our school funding on property taxes, we are encouraging the historic disinvestment in our schools. The fair funding lawsuit makes it clear we can no longer rely on this method. I am glad the court has recognized this historic inequity. Now it is time to act.

The City of Philadelphia puts up roughly half of the Philadelphia School District's funding. Philadelphia ranks 232nd out of 499 school districts in per-student spending. Philadelphia School District is the largest district in the Commonwealth, nearly 6 times larger than the second largest. For a District so large, in a city rife with so many issues affecting our young people, that is upsetting and it must change.

Concrete targets must be set to identify what Philadelphia and districts across the Commonwealth need. City Council has done and will continue to do everything we can to secure fair funding for our young people. City Council and the Education Committee, the School District, and the School Board are committed to ensuring our students and families can learn and grow in the City of Philadelphia.

Thank you to the Basic Education Funding Commission for providing the platform to discuss this important issue.