



To: Basic Education Funding Commission
From: David Lapp, Director of Policy Research at Research for Action
Date: September 21, 2023
Re: The Upside-Down System: Inequity in Pennsylvania's System of Public Education

Hello, my name is David Lapp, and I serve as the Director of Policy at Research for Action, a 30-year-old Pennsylvania-based education research and evaluation firm with a mission to use field-driven insights to advance equity in opportunities and outcomes for underserved students.

I direct RFA's Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research project (PACER), which seeks to summarize research and provide original analyses to improve understanding of how Pennsylvania's system of public education is functioning under state policy. With more than two decades of experience studying local, state, and federal education law, policy, and practice, as a teacher, education law attorney, and policy researcher, I am honored to address you today.

I am also a proud parent of three children who have all attended Philadelphia public schools.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you some critical research findings from Research for Action and from others in the field that speak to the current degree of inequity in Pennsylvania's system of public education.

If nothing else, I hope you take away the following three main points:

1. **Inequity is the defining feature of Pennsylvania's system of public education.** It is what sets Pennsylvania apart from other states in the nation, in the wrong way. It is in many ways, an upside-down system that often operates the opposite of how it should. We see nation-leading inequity in just about every metric of public education in Pennsylvania. As I will illustrate:
 - We see it in school funding gaps.
 - We see it in education opportunity gaps.
 - We see it in achievement gaps.
2. **The state must identify adequacy targets to eliminate inequity in school funding.** It is impossible to eliminate inequity in school funding without identifying school funding adequacy. There are several empirically based, rational approaches and methods for identifying school funding adequacy. (Including one already embedded in state law).
3. **Pennsylvania schools work when they are equitably and adequately funded.** Large parts of the system have been neglected and need repair. But many Pennsylvania communities operate public schools that would be the pride of any state, with state-of-the-art facilities, high teacher/student ratios, experienced, diverse, well-paid educators, challenging and engaging curriculum with rich opportunities in art, music, athletics, STEM, and technical education, and outstanding student achievement. The challenge before you is not to abandon this system, but to ensure every Pennsylvania community has the resources to make schools work for all students.

1. Inequity: The Defining Feature of Public Education in Pennsylvania.

Inequity is what distinguishes Pennsylvania’s public education system. Virtually every meaningful metric consistently tells the same story: Pennsylvania’s public school system boasts relatively high overall average performance (in funding, in opportunity, in outcomes), but these averages are masking nation-leading inequity (gaps in funding, gaps in opportunity, and gaps in student outcomes). While gaps exist in most states, the size and scope of the gaps in Pennsylvania are national outliers. The egregious inequity in Pennsylvania’s public education system is not normal. It is far from ordinary and not acceptable.

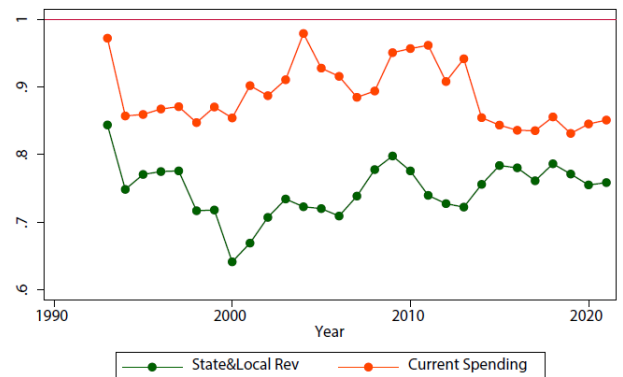
A. Funding Gaps

This Commission’s charge is to recommend a constitutional system, one that will provide maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education that serves the needs of the Commonwealth, so I would like to provide a brief review of what research has found regarding school funding in Pennsylvania.

Study after study has reached the same basic conclusion—nationally, Pennsylvania ranks on the higher side of overall school funding but ranks near the bottom in terms of school funding equity. The majority of states have progressive public school funding systems, meaning their public schools with high poverty rates receive more funding than public schools with low poverty. But not in Pennsylvania.

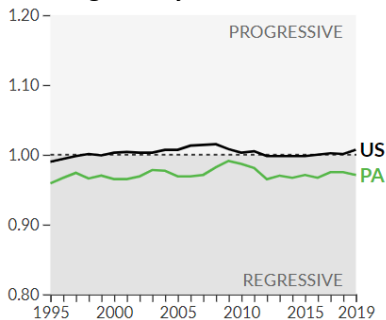
The [School Finance Indicators Database](#) by Baker, Di Carlo, and Weber ranks Pennsylvania 11th in the nation on overall school spending. However, they found Pennsylvania’s school funding “severely unequal,” with districts serving high child poverty areas spending just barely 80% of the per pupil investments of districts with low poverty districts (see Figure 1). The study ranks Pennsylvania #44 in the nation (out of 48 states) in the level of school funding progressivity, indicating that Pennsylvania is one of only eight states with a regressive school funding system. The study also documented profound disparities by student race, finding Pennsylvania has the 4th largest Black/White adequate funding gap in the nation and the 3rd largest Hispanic/White adequate funding gap.ⁱ Similar findings have been reported by the Urban Institute (see figure 2),ⁱⁱ and the Education Law Center located in New Jersey. ELC graded Pennsylvania with an “A” on total funding, but assigned a grade of “F” on funding distribution (see figure 3).ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 1: School Finance Progressivity in Pennsylvania



Source: The [School Finance Indicators Database](#), 2023.

Figure 2: Local, State, & Federal Funding Pennsylvania vs. Nation



Source: [The Urban Institute](#), 2022.

the 3rd largest Hispanic/White adequate funding gap.ⁱ Similar findings have been reported by the Urban Institute (see figure 2),ⁱⁱ and the Education Law Center located in New Jersey. ELC graded Pennsylvania with an “A” on total funding, but assigned a grade of “F” on funding distribution (see figure 3).ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 3: Difference(%) in per-pupil funding in high-poverty districts relative to low-poverty districts (2020)

Distribution Grade	State	Low-Poverty Districts	High-Poverty Districts	Funding Distribution: Advantage (+) / Disadvantage (-) in High Poverty Districts
F	Pennsylvania	\$19,499	\$15,312	-21%

Source: The [Education Law Center](#), 2022

Every credible study finds consistent results: Pennsylvania’s overall school funding is average or above, but it is unfairly distributed, creating dramatic inequity. This is an upside-down school funding system.

B. Opportunity Gaps

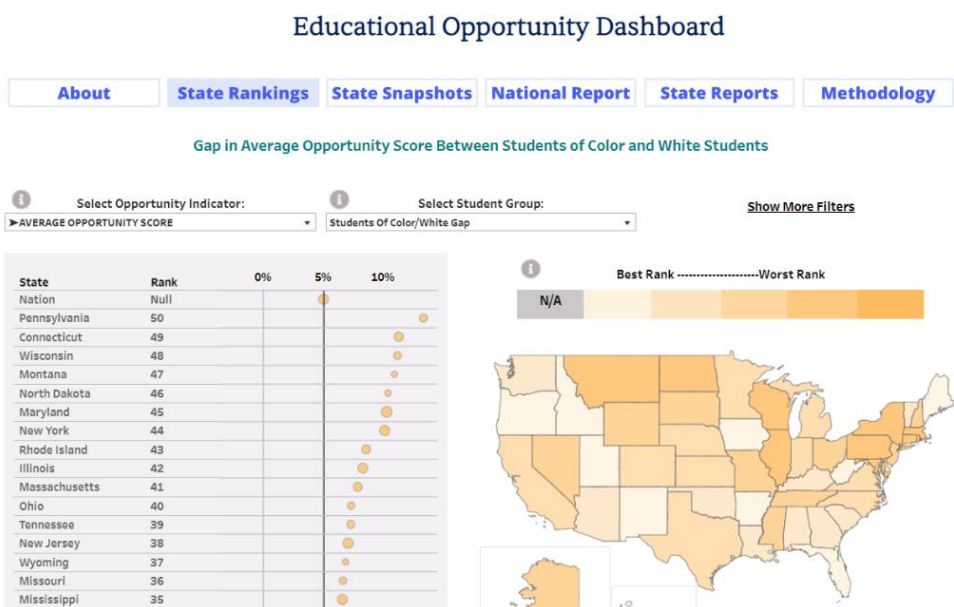
Adequate and equitable school funding matters because it allows schools to provide students with adequate and equitable access to educational opportunities. Conversely, a lack of adequate and equitable funding means a lack of access to these education opportunities.

1. Educational Opportunity Dashboard

At Research for Action, we have been working to measure school “inputs,” which are indicators of whether states are providing their students access to educational opportunity. Using the federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC),^{iv} we created the [Educational Opportunity Dashboard](#), which ranks the 50 states based on access to 14 indicators from the CRDC that measure access to three essential areas of education opportunity: (1) Quality Educators, (2) Quality School Climate, and (3) a College & Career Ready Curriculum. We also calculated an Average Opportunity Score.

We found that Pennsylvania’s access to educational opportunities mirrors its access to equitable and adequate school funding-- good on average but inequitably distributed. While Pennsylvania ranks 17th overall in average access to opportunity, it ranks 50th, the worst in the nation, in terms of gaps in access to educational opportunity between our White students and students of color.

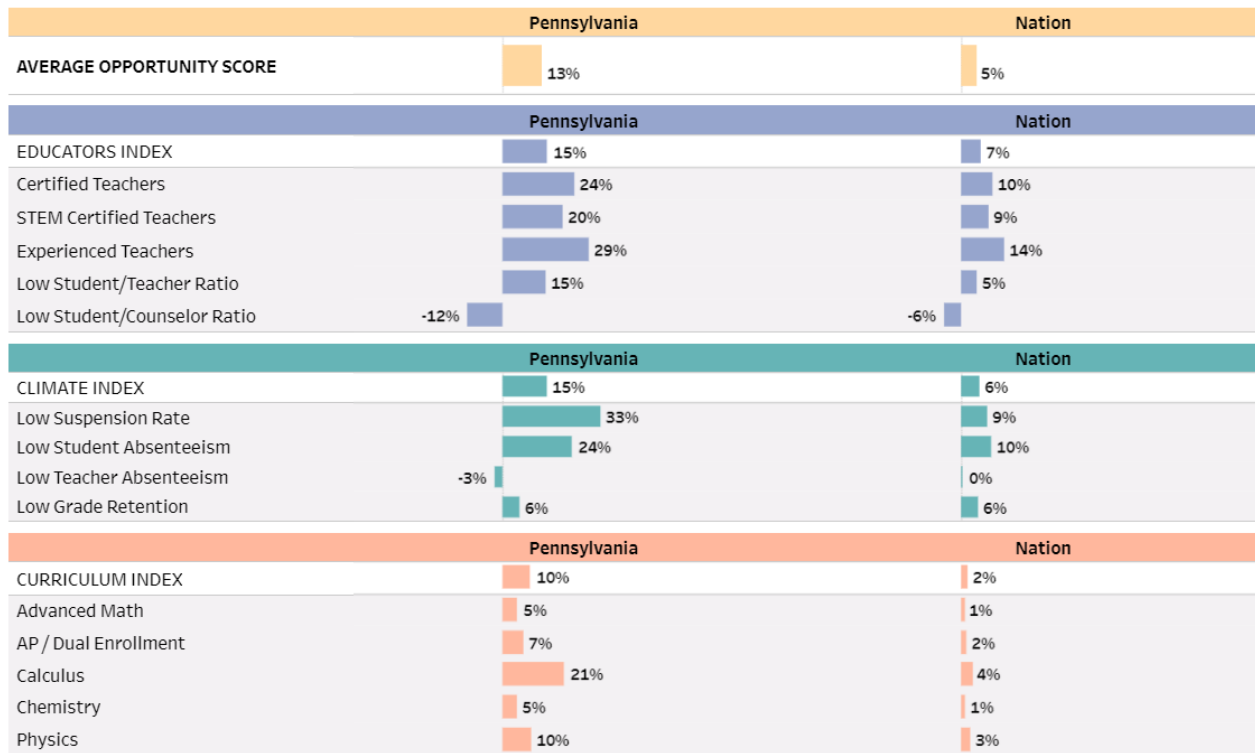
Students of color in Pennsylvania have less access to schools with quality educators, quality school climate, and with a college and career ready curriculum compared to their White peers.



Source: Research for Action’s [Educational Opportunity Dashboard](#), 2022

RFA’s Education Opportunity Dashboard measures race and family income gaps across the nation, but the size of the gaps in Pennsylvania are consistently larger than national comparisons. Figure 4 shows wider gaps by race in Pennsylvania than the nation on 12 of 14 indicators, meaning students of color having less access to certified teachers, certified STEM teachers, experienced teachers, and a low student/teacher ratio; less access to schools with low suspension rates and low student absenteeism; and less access to schools that provide advanced math, AP or dual enrollment courses, calculus, chemistry, physics courses.

Figure 4: Gaps in Educational Opportunity Between Students of Color and White Students in Pennsylvania

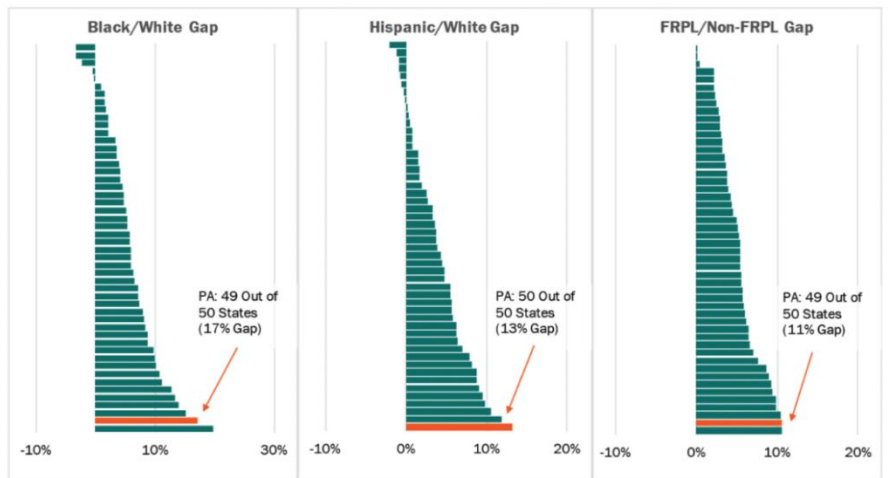


Source: Research for Action's [Educational Opportunity Dashboard](#), State Snapshot, 2022

We also break down the Average Opportunity Score rankings by the size of gaps between Black/White and Hispanic/White students, and by gaps between students who are eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) and students who are not eligible. Pennsylvania ranks 49th, 50th, and 49th respectively in these comparisons (see Figure 5).

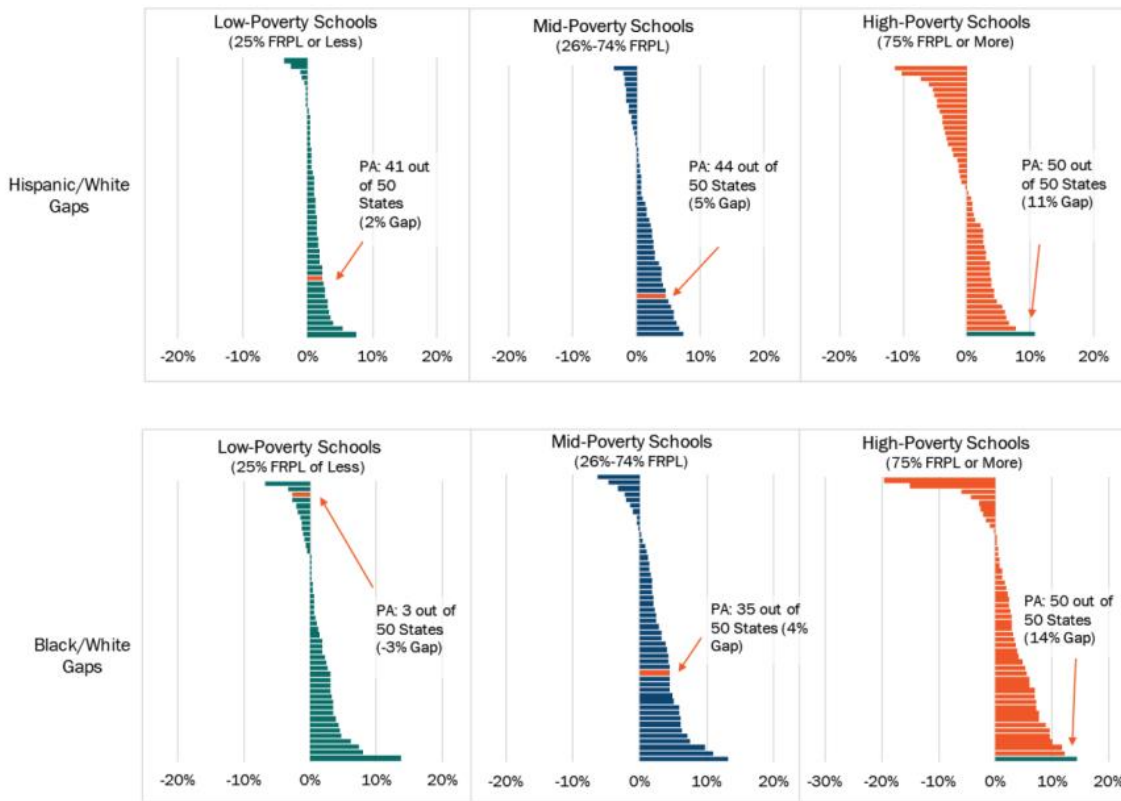
Finally, racial disparities in educational opportunity persist across school poverty. Pennsylvania's White students who attend high-poverty schools are provided more access to educational opportunity than Pennsylvania's Black or Hispanic students who attend high poverty schools (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Gaps in Average Opportunity Score in Schools, by Race/Income Gaps and State



Source: Research for Action's [Educational Opportunity Dashboard](#), [State Report](#), 2022

Figure 6: Gaps in Average Opportunity, by Race and School Poverty Groups



Source: Research for Action's *Educational Opportunity Dashboard*, [State Report](#), 2022

The bottom line is that *no other state that ranks so high for White students compared to White students in other states, yet ranks so low for Black and Hispanic students, compared to other Black and Hispanic students in other states. The same is true for students eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch.*^v

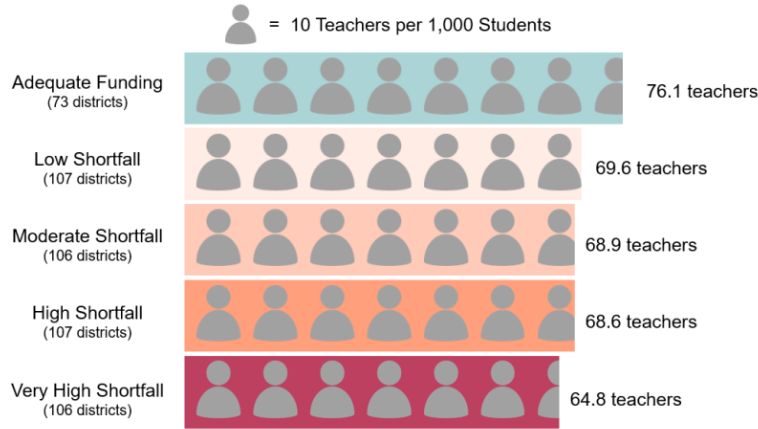
The Dashboard shows Pennsylvania's upside-down funding is matched by upside-down access to educational opportunities. This is the opposite of what it should. But the Dashboard is far from the only source demonstrating these huge inequities in inputs and opportunities.

2. Pennsylvania School Funding and School Staffing Disparities

Recent findings from the Pennsylvania Department of Education have underscored significant disparities in our education system. Pennsylvania Department of Education found that students from low-wealth districts—particularly students of color in those districts—are nearly twice as likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers or by “out of field” teachers, who lack training in the grade or subject they’re teaching.^{vi} Additionally, Dr. Edward Fuller of Penn State University recently documented large disparities in both teacher vacancies and teacher attrition rates by student and teacher race.^{vii} Research for Action has examined these and other teacher and staffing disparities in depth and specifically in relation to school funding adequacy in Pennsylvania schools.^{viii}

Drawing on school funding adequacy calculations from Dr. Matthew Kelly of Penn State University, we compared the number of teachers and other staff per 1,000 students based on the degree of school districts' adequacy shortfalls.

Figure 7: Teachers per 1,000 Student in Pennsylvania Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20



Source: Research for Action, [Staffing Disparities](#), 2023

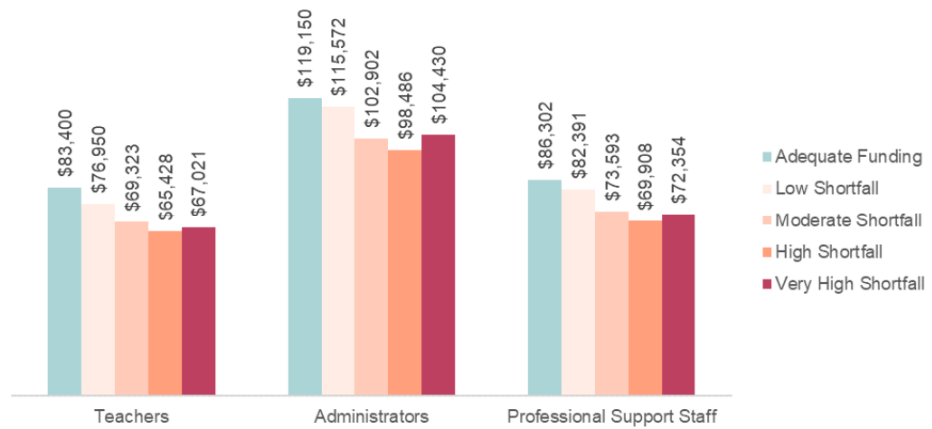
We found that students in adequately funded school districts, with no funding shortfall receive more than 11 additional teachers per 1,000 students than students in the highest shortfall districts (see figure 7).

These disparities are not isolated; they extend across teacher types, including General Education, STEM, Special Education, Arts, Health and Physical Education, Foreign Language, and Specialist teachers. The same trends emerge when examining rates of Administrators and other professional support staff.

Additionally, when comparing average salaries for teachers, administrators, and other professional support staff, our analysis shows districts with the highest shortfalls and lowest numbers of teachers and support staff also offer lower salaries (see Figure 8).

Further, these districts with the fewest staff and lowest salaries also tend to serve a higher percentage of students facing economic disadvantage, students with special education needs, and English learners, as illustrated in Figure 9.

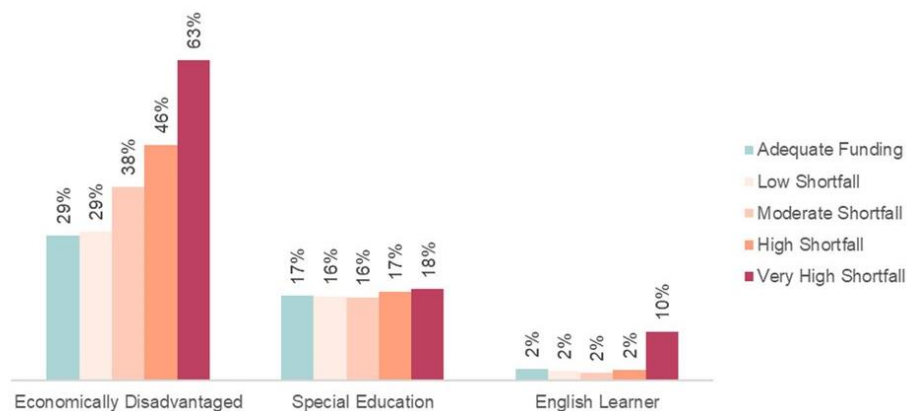
Figure 8: Average Salaries by Pennsylvania District Funding Adequacy Per Pupil, 2019-20



Source: Research for Action, [Staffing Disparities](#), 2023

To address these glaring disparities, it is essential to acknowledge the significant resource gap this represents. Our calculations demonstrate that inadequately funded districts in Pennsylvania would collectively need to hire more than 11,000 additional teachers, 1,000 administrators, and 1,600 professional support staff, and pay an additional \$2.6 billion in salaries alone, merely to match the staffing rates and salaries in adequately funded districts.^{ix}

Figure 9: Student Characteristics by Pennsylvania District Funding Adequacy Per Pupil, 2019-20



Source: Research for Action, [Staffing Disparities](#), 2023

3. Many Other Forms of Additional Educational Inequity

Unfortunately, we do not yet as a nation or state have a comprehensive database that measures the multiple kinds of educational opportunity that schools provide and we are not yet able to draw a clear causal link between funding and each kind of opportunity. But research has identified many other forms of inequity in our state’s education system and many of these are clearly related to school funding and access to resources. We lack time to examine all of these, but I wish to mention several briefly.

Segregation

Research consistently finds Pennsylvania, public schools in particular, ranks as among the nations most segregated states and home to some of the country’s most segregated school systems.^x Research has also found strong correlations between segregation and school funding disparities.^{xi} Improving school funding equity and adequacy is key to reducing segregation as families with means are less incentivized to leave communities with adequately funded schools.

Facilities

Funding school facilities is an enormous topic and one in great need of attention in Pennsylvania’s school funding policy. Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer’s voluminous opinion outlined dramatic evidence of inequity in Pennsylvania’s school infrastructure.^{xii} And Research for Action outlined the dearth of publicly available data on school facilities in Pennsylvania while also documenting that Pennsylvania’s new Maintenance Project Grant Program could function similarly to programs in our neighboring states, if properly funded. Several of Pennsylvania’s neighboring states base the local share of school facilities maintenance costs, at least in part, on the wealth of the local district.^{xiii}

Out of School Time

Research has found that, for as extensive the disparities are for educational opportunity in-school, disparities are even greater for opportunities for extracurricular activities and out-of-school time.^{xiv} RFA

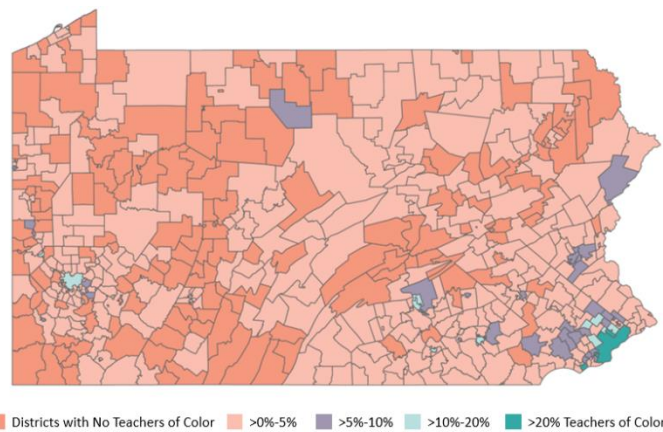
recently found that Pennsylvania is again an outlier compared to our neighboring states in our failure to provide dedicated state funding in support of out of school time.^{xv}

Educator Diversity

For several years Research for Action has been compiling data providing analysis of the state of teacher diversity in Pennsylvania, and consistently found that Pennsylvania is a national outlier for the degree of disparity between our student diversity and our teacher diversity.^{xvi} In 2022-23, over 1,358 Pennsylvania schools (46% of all schools) and 155 entire school districts (31% of all districts) employed zero teachers of color (see Figure 10).

There were 596,852 students (including 103,621 students of color) enrolled in PA schools that only had White teachers.

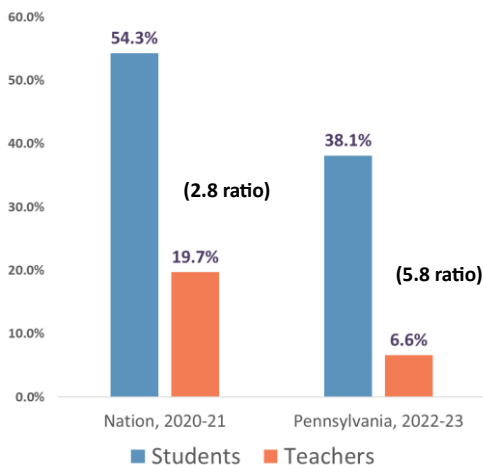
Figure 10: Concentration of Teachers of Color by District in Pennsylvania, 2022-23



Source: Research for Action, [PA Educator Diversity Presentation](#), 2023

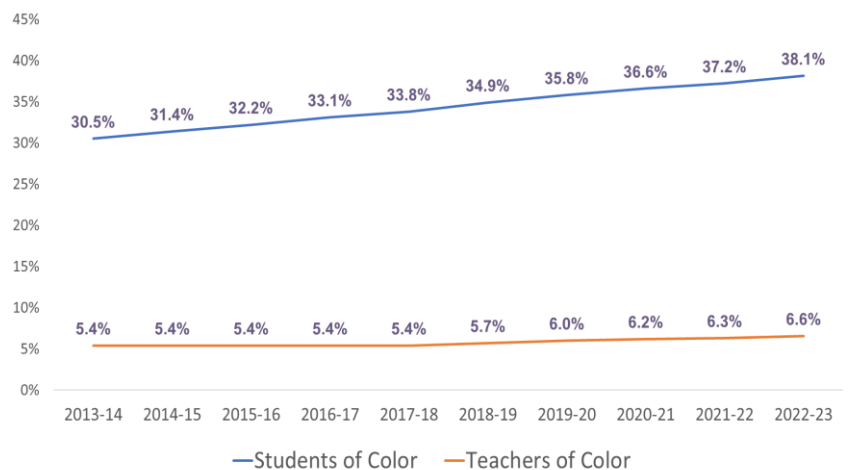
Meanwhile, the dearth of teacher diversity is not merely attributable to state demographics. We found the ratio of students of color compared to teachers of color to be consistently the highest or second highest in the nation (see Figure 11). And Pennsylvania's disparities have been growing (see Figure 12).

Figure 11: Students and Teachers of Color: The Nation vs. Pennsylvania



Source: Research for Action, [PA Educator Diversity Presentation](#), 2023

Figure 12: Change in Percentage of Students and Teachers of Color in Pennsylvania, 2013-14 to 2022-23



We have also found that our system's educators of color are heavily concentrated in our most underfunded school districts, which undoubtedly contributes to more challenging working conditions and higher attrition rates.^{xvii}

C. Achievement Gaps

These inequities in funding and opportunity are reflected in student achievement outcomes. While Pennsylvania’s students score at or above the national average on standardized tests,^{xviii} the achievement gaps in Pennsylvania are consistently among the nation’s largest.^{xix}

Figure 13: NAEP – Hispanic/White Scaled Score Gaps: Nation vs Pennsylvania, 2013-2022

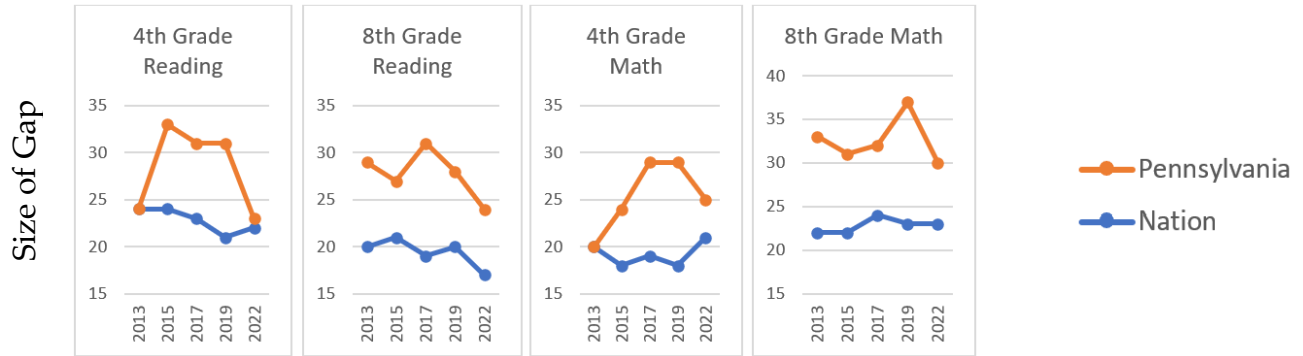
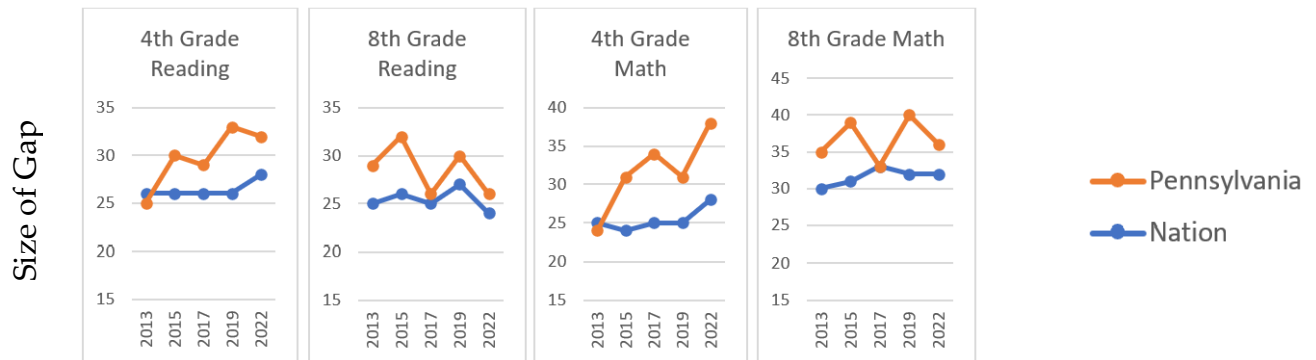


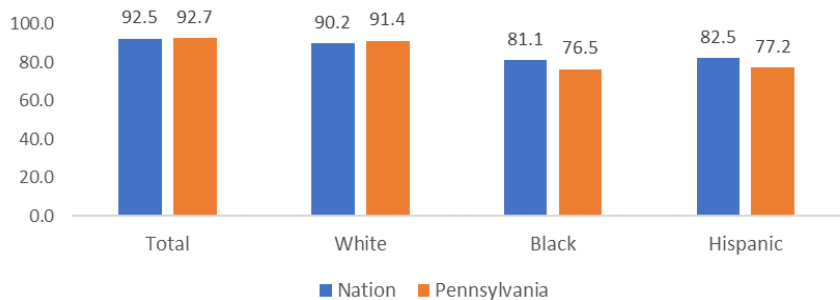
Figure 14: NAEP – Black/White Scaled Score Gaps: Nation vs Pennsylvania, 2013-2022



Source: Figures by Research for Action, Data from The Nation’s Report Card, [Achievement Gap Dashboard](#), 2023

Research has also found that Pennsylvania's achievement gaps are larger than expected even when controlling for poverty.^{xx}

Figure 15: Average Graduation Rates: Pennsylvania vs. Nation, 2010-11 to 2019-20



As shown in Figure 15, data on graduation rates tell the same story: average or better graduation rates in Pennsylvania than most states, but with larger than average gaps in graduation rates.^{xxi}

Source: Figure by Research for Action, Data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), 2023

2. The state must identify adequacy targets to eliminate inequity.

Where does this leave us? With such clear evidence that educational inequity (in funding, in opportunity, and in student outcomes) is the defining characteristic of public education in Pennsylvania, the main question must be, how do we fix it? How do we know what amount of school funding is equitable? How do we know what schools need to effectively serve their students? To answer these questions, we must define and calculate adequacy targets.

Adequacy and equity are inextricably linked; they are two sides of the same coin. Achieving equity requires *fairness*, ensuring that every school system receives what it *needs* (i.e., what is adequate) to effectively educate students.^{xxii} This is different from equality, because equity requires more resources for schools serving students with greater needs.

The current special and basic education funding formulas enacted in 2014 and 2016 respectively, were a move in the right direction. The weights for student headcounts and accounting for differences in district characteristics are all supported by research and best practices used in states with strong funding systems. But the failure to identify adequacy targets limits the impact of these formulas.

This moment presents an opportunity for the Commission to fulfill its mission and finish what it started. By refining the existing formulas to incorporate adequacy targets and subsequently allocate resources proportionally to districts with the largest shortfalls, we can achieve school funding fairness. I reviewed the compelling "successful schools" model presented by Dr. Matthew Kelly. The Commission would be wise to endorse such an approach. If this model were enacted into state law, and used to progressively distribute state resources to districts with the most significant adequacy gaps, it would be pivotal to provide equitable access to educational opportunities, ultimately narrowing achievement gaps.

Closing thoughts

In closing, I want to reiterate that our public education system is invaluable and deserving of preservation and enhancement. We have witnessed the success of adequately funded public schools, serving as beacons of excellence within Pennsylvania communities. The path before us is clear: we must address the inequities in our system, beginning with equitable and adequate school funding.

I urge caution against diverting focus from this vital path. Recent proposals for vouchers and diverting tax revenues to private schools pose risks to the commitment to educational equity, as observed in other states. The research on vouchers has largely been unfavorable.^{xxiii} RFA's analysis reveals that Pennsylvania's proposed voucher districts are already among the most underfunded, and they struggle to provide an adequate number of teachers, despite serving students with the greatest needs. ^{xxiv} These are the districts in dire need of your support.

Pennsylvania already has too many policies that drive inefficient use of resources and improperly drain funds from needy districts, including the negative fiscal impact from underperforming cyber charter schools,^{xxv} or the perverse incentives in special education funding for all charter schools.^{xxvi} Before we create new systems, we should focus on fixing existing inefficiencies and on meeting the constitutional mandate to provide equitable and adequate school funding to all public schools.

I appreciate your consideration of this testimony and welcome any future opportunity to share research, data, and analysis with the Commission.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Weber, M. (2023). School Finance Indicators Database. <https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/>
- ⁱⁱ The Urban Institute. (2022, April). Which Students Receive a Greater Share of School Funding? <https://apps.urban.org/features/school-funding-trends/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Farrie, D., & Sciarra, D. G. (2022, December). Making the Grade: How Fair is School Funding in Your State? Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/research/making-the-grade-2022.html>
- ^{iv} The federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is one of the only data sources with multiple indicators of educational inputs that are collected and reported the same way for every school in the entire nation.
- ^v Freeman, J., & Bamat, D. (2022). Persistent Unequal Access to Educational Opportunity in Pennsylvania for K-12 Students. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/RFA-PersistentUnequalAccessToEducationalOpportunityinPennsylvaniaForK-12Students.pdf>
- ^{vi} Falk, M. (2021, December 4). Ex-Pa. Education official: Student Achievement Gap Won't be Closed Without Funding Changes. WHY? <https://why.org/articles/ex-pa-education-official-student-achievement-gap-wont-be-closed-without-funding-changes/>
- ^{vii} Fuller, E. (2023, May). Exacerbating the Shortage of Teachers: Rising Teacher Attrition in Pennsylvania from 2014 to 2023. University Park, PA. Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis. <https://ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/ceepa-research-brief-2023-6--exacerbating-the-shortage-of-teachers-ed-fuller-1.pdf>; Fuller, E. (2022). Teacher Supply and Demand in Pennsylvania: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis. Pennsylvania State University. https://ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/CEEPA_report_V2.pdf
- ^{viii} Lapp, D., & Shaw-Amoah, A. (2023, June 1). Pennsylvania School Funding and School Staffing Disparities. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/pennsylvania-school-funding-and-school-staffing-disparities/>
- ^{ix} This only includes matching salaries of existing and additional staff. This does not include additional costs to match pensions or other benefits or funding to match disparities in other district expenses, such as non-professional support staff, contracted staff, transportation, facilities, etc. In addition, to provide students an opportunity to meet state standards districts with high rates of vulnerable students require not merely *equal* funding, but rather *equitable and adequate* funding.
- ^x Frankenberg, E., et al. (2019, May). Harming Our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years After Brown. Center for Education and Civil Rights. <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/harming-our-common-future-americas-segregated-schools-65-years-after-brown> (finding that Black students in Pennsylvania have the seventh highest likelihood of the 50 states to attend at least 90% same race schools and that Hispanic students in Pennsylvania have the 12th highest likelihood); Other research found Pennsylvania to be home to some of most segregated cities in the nation by race and income. See Potter, H. (2022). School Segregation in U.S. Metro Areas 2022. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/report/school-segregation-in-u-s-metro-areas/> Note: This project is a collaboration between The Century Foundation and the Segregation Index, led by A. Owens (Department of Sociology, University of Southern California) and S. F. Reardon (Professor of Poverty and Inequality in Education and Sociology, Stanford University). Another study ranked Pennsylvania as 43rd in the nation regarding overall racial integration. McCann, A. (2023). 2023's States with the Most Racial Progress. WalletHub. <https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-most-and-least-racial-progress/18428#rankings-integration>
- ^{xi} See Baker, Bruce D., Di Carlo, Matthew, and Green III, Preston C. (2022). *Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Opportunity*. Albert Shankar Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.shankarinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/SEGreportfinal.pdf>.
- ^{xii} William Penn School District et al. v. Pennsylvania Department of Education et al., No. 587 M.D. 2014. Memorandum opinion by President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer, filed February 7, 2023. [PDF file]. <https://pubintlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/02.07.23-Memorandum-Opinion-Filed-pubintlaw.pdf>

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- ^{xiii} Duffy, M., & Lapp, D. (2020, October). State Funding to Ensure Safe and Healthy Facilities: Lessons for Pennsylvania. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/state-funding-to-ensure-safe-and-healthy-facilities-lessons-for-pennsylvania/>
- ^{xiv} Park, Julie J., et al. (2023). *Inequality Beyond Standardized Tests: Trends in Extracurricular Activity Reporting in College Applications Across Race and Class*. (EdWorkingPaper: 23-749). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/jkcy-x822>.
- ^{xv} Duffy, M., & Hartman, T. (2023). State Funding to Support OST Programming in Pennsylvania. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/out-of-school-time/state-funding-to-support-out-of-school-time-programming-in-pennsylvania/>
- ^{xvi} A repository of Research for Action's Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Research is available at <https://www.researchforaction.org/pennsylvania-educator-diversity-research/>
- ^{xvii} Lapp, D., & Shaw-Amoah, A. (2023, May). Pennsylvania School Funding and School Staffing Disparities. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/pennsylvania-school-funding-and-school-staffing-disparities/>
- ^{xviii} National Assessment of Educational Progress. (n.d.). The Nation's Report Card: NAEP Data Explorer. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/xplore/NDE>
- ^{xix} National Assessment of Educational Progress. (n.d.). The Nation's Report Card: Achievement Gaps Dashboard. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement_gaps.aspx
- ^{xx} Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis. (2015, February). The Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/> (Note section entitled, "Some states' achievement gaps are higher or lower than would be predicted by their socioeconomic conditions alone.")
- ^{xxi} National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Table 219.46. Digest of Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_219.46.asp
- ^{xxii} See, [National Equity Project](#) ("Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential"); [Center for Public Education](#) ("Equality in education is achieved when students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources. **Equity** is achieved when all students receive *the resources they need* so they graduate prepared for success after high school"); [Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University](#) ("Equity does not mean that every child in a district receives equal dollars. Instead, we look for horizontal and vertical equity as appropriate measures. i. Horizontal equity: Do students with similar characteristics receive equal resources? ii. Vertical equity: Do students with dissimilar characteristics receive **appropriately** dissimilar resources?"); [Picus Odden](#) ("School finance equity addresses the degree to which dollars per pupil vary across districts for any reasons, as well as the degree to which differences in dollars per pupil are linked to local measures of fiscal capacity"); [Pennsylvania School Board's Association](#) ("Equity is the just and fair distribution of resources based upon each individual student's needs. Equitable resources include funding, programs, policies, initiatives and supports that target each student's unique background and school context to guarantee that all students have equal access to a high-quality education"); [Pennsylvania Department of Education](#) ("In a vacuum, equity simply means 'the quality of being fair and impartial.'").
- ^{xxiii} Barnum, M. (2017, July 12). Do school vouchers 'work'? As the debate heats up, here's what research really says. Chalkbeat. Updated 2023, May 31. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2017/7/12/21108235/school-choice-vouchers-system-pros-and-cons-research>.
- ^{xxiv} Research for Action. (2023, July). The Need for Support in Pennsylvania's Proposed Voucher School Districts. <https://www.researchforaction.org/news-events/news/the-lack-of-support-for-pennsylvanias-proposed-voucher-school-districts/>
- ^{xxv} Lapp, D., & Eddins, M. (2022, June). The Negative Fiscal Impact of Cyber Charter School Expansion in Pennsylvania Due to COVID-19. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/the-negative-fiscal-impact-of-cyber-charter-school-expansion-in-pennsylvania-due-to-covid-19/>.
- ^{xxvi} Lapp, D. (2021, April). Special Education Funding in Pennsylvania Charter Schools. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/special-education-funding-in-pennsylvania-charter-schools/>.

Prepared Testimony of
Marc Stier
Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Policy Center
to the
Basic Education Funding Commission
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Chairs Sturla and Phillips-Hill and members of the commission,

Thank you for inviting me to testify to you today.

What I'd like to do in my testimony today is take a step back from some of the immediate questions such as how much to spend and how to fund public education in Pennsylvania to address a broader question: Why is funding public education so important?

You might think that attention to this question is unnecessary. But there are two good reasons why we must provide an adequate and equitable public education for all children in the Commonwealth.

What the Constitution Requires

First, our constitution requires it. Judge Jubelirer's opinion clearly shows that the words "create a thorough and efficient systems of public education" mean that every student should receive a meaningful opportunity to succeed academically, socially, and civically, which requires that all students have access to a comprehensive, effective, and contemporary system of public education. It is also clear from the evidence presented to the court that we do not provide every student with such an opportunity today, which corresponds with the same evidence presented over the years by my former organization, the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, and others. We have all shown that not only are the vast majority of school districts in Pennsylvania underfunded *relative to our own state standards* but that districts with a higher share of Pennsylvanians living in poverty and districts with a larger share of Black and Hispanic students are even more underfunded than others.¹

What the People Want

So, the Pennsylvania Constitution demands that we fund public education adequately and equitably. But so do the people of Pennsylvania. A recent poll by Data for Progress on behalf of the Pennsylvania Schools Work campaign shows that 69% of registered voters, including majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, as well as majorities in urban, rural, and suburban communities, believe that there is a substantial difference in educational equality from one school district to another. And, as a result, an overwhelming majority of registered voters—77%—across these same partisan and geographic categories support additional state funding for public schools. These results are so robust that that we estimate there is no House or Senate district in which less than 71% of registered voters support additional state funding for public schools.

1. Among many other pieces see: Marc Stier, Eugene Henninger-Voss, Diana Polson, and Stephen Herzenberg, *Inequity and Inadequacy in K-12 Education Funding in Pennsylvania: Fiscal Year 2022-23 Update*, Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, November 22, 2022. https://krc-pbpc.org/research_publication/inequity-and-inadequacy-in-k-12-education-funding-in-pennsylvania-fiscal-year-2022-23-update/. The Pennsylvania Policy Center will be updating this analysis of economic, racial, and ethnic inequity in school funding with the most recent adequacy data provided by Professor Matthew Kelly in the next few weeks.

Why Is Public Education So Important?

There is no question then that the Pennsylvania Constitution demands, and Pennsylvania voters want, additional state funding of public schools. But we can still ask “Why?” And that, I believe, is a question worth considering. Knowing why public education is so important to the framers of our constitution in the past and to the people of Pennsylvania today can help all of us—legislators, activists, and citizens—understand the critical importance of meeting those demands.

If you look back at the debates about the education clause of the Pennsylvania Constitution, both when it was created in the late 19th century and revised in the 1960s, you find similar sentiments. Many of those who spoke about the necessity of the education clause in the Constitution mentioned the importance of educating good citizens so they could play their vital role in our republic. But another of the dominant themes of the debates about the education clause was the importance of education to creating economic prosperity, not just for those who receive a public education but for everyone.

Unfortunately, few recent polls, including our own, directly ask voters about the connection between public education and democracy. This is no doubt a reflection of the unfortunate decline of providing civic education in our schools.

But our poll did ask voters what kind of educational policies they thought were most valuable to driving economic growth forward in the state. Not surprisingly, the three most important policies they embraced were access to career and technical training programs, access to apprenticeships and job training programs, and funding science and technology education. Similarly, national polls show that voters value those aspects of education that contribute to the work and careers of individual students as well as to our economy as a whole.²

The Great Educator: Thaddeus Stevens

Sometimes it’s easiest to understand why something exists if we go back to its origin. So, I want to spend a few minutes looking at the education advocacy of Thaddeus Stevens, the greatest Republican legislator in Pennsylvania history. Before he became the great liberator as a U.S. senator, Stevens was the “great educator” as a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. In his famous 1835 speech against the repeal of the common school law, Stevens said, “If an elective republic is to endure for any great length of time every elector must have sufficient information, not only to accumulate wealth and take care of his pecuniary concerns, but to direct wisely the Legislature, the Ambassadors, and the Executive of the nation.”³

The two themes—democracy and prosperity—are clearly denoted in this and other passages in his speech. And I’d like to point out that Stevens was arguing against legislators who proposed to repeal the free common school law and replace it with a subsidy for the poor to attend private schools. Stevens would not accept that as an alternative to free common schools even though he acknowledged that there were voters

2. Hart Research Associates, “The Nation’s Education Agenda,” January 13, 2023, https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2023/slides_national-education-survey_Jan2023.pdf.

3. Representative Thaddeus Stevens, “Opposition to the Repeal of the Common School Law of 1834, in the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania,” April 11, 1835, Philadelphia: Thaddeus Stevens Memorial Association, 1904, https://collections.lancasterhistory.org/media/library/docs/famous_speech_of_Hon_Thaddeus_Stevens-1904_edition.pdf.

who were not happy about paying the school tax because they thought that schools are, “for the benefit of others and not themselves.”

Stevens insisted that those seeking the repeal of the free common school law to reduce their taxes were mistaken because those schools *are* “for their own benefit.” That is, he insisted that everyone benefited from the education of all the children of Pennsylvania because it contributed to both civic education and an education that helped every child grow up to contribute to the prosperity of the state. The public schools of New England were his model. He said, “In New England free schools plant the seeds and desire of knowledge in every mind, without regard to the wealth of the parent or the texture of the pupil’s garments. When the seed, thus universally sown, happens to fall on fertile soil, it springs up and is fostered by a generous public until it produces its glorious fruit.... It is not an uncommon occurrence to see the poor man’s son, thus encouraged by wise legislation, far outstrip and bear off the laurels from the less industrious heirs of wealth. Some of the ablest men of the present and past days never could have been educated except for that benevolent system.”

That is one of the most important reasons that adequately and equitably funded public schools are so important. Not just because fairness requires it but because we all benefit from well-funded public schools. The greatest resource any country has is the skills and talents of its people. When we fail to give every child a good education, their potential contributions as adults with great skills and talents are lost to all of us. That is why our democracy and our prosperity are created and sustained by higher levels and a higher quality of education.

Contemporary Evidence

Stevens’s claims are not ideals detached from reality. There has been an upsurge of research in the last two decades on the contribution of education to both economic growth and the survival of democracy. The evidence that started as a trickle has become a torrent, and while there are outliers, most of it points in the same direction.

It is now apparent that what made America great in the past was in no small part by our early commitment to giving every child a good, basic education as well as our later commitment to making higher education open to all. There is evidence from cross-national comparisons that both additional years of schooling and higher quality schooling, as measured by standardized tests, leads to a higher productivity workforce and thus higher per capita gross domestic product. *The increase in education levels since the 19th century have been estimated to account for between one-fifth and one-third of economic growth in the United States.*⁴

There is also research that looks at the relationship between the educational attainment levels and economic success of the 50 states. One study shows that high-wage, and thus high-prosperity, states are those with a well-educated workforce.⁵ Another shows that achievement levels are highly correlated—and are likely the

4. Edwin Dean, *Education and Economic Productivity*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1984 and Robert Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, *Education Matters: Global Schooling Gains from the 19th to the 21st Century*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005; Eileen McGivney and Rebecca Winthrop, “Education’s Impact of Economic Growth and Productivity,” Brookings Institute, July 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/educations-impact-on-productivity.pdf>.

5. Noah Berger and Peter Fisher, *A Well-Educated Workforce is Key to State Prosperity*, Economic Policy Institute, August 22, 2013, <https://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>.

cause of—faster economic growth in the states. Sadly, Pennsylvania falls at about the middle of the 50 states in GDP per capita.⁶

There is also new evidence that school spending has a dramatic effect on students' future wages with estimates showing a permanent 10% increase in education spending, resulting in adults at age 40 having 7% higher wages and a 3-percentage point reduction in the likelihood of being poor. Most strikingly, the wage gap between low-income and middle- and high-income students is narrowed. Of course, higher wages drive higher consumption and more business activity, helping the economy as a whole. While extrapolating these results to the economy as a whole is difficult, my back of the envelope calculation is that \$1 billion per year in new education spending would lead to a 2.2% average increase in Pennsylvania wages, a reduction in the poverty rate of 1.1 percentage points, an increase in the state gross product of about \$900 million, and the generation of about 12,000 jobs for Pennsylvanians. If we add the multiplier effect of this new spending, the impact would be 50% greater. Scholars who have studied the relationship between educational achievement and economic growth have provided striking research that projects the impact of improving education in our country. One study suggests that if, over time, American schools could have results as good as German schools, in just two generations our per capita gross domestic product would be 50% higher than it would be if our schools do not improve. That would mean that the average worker's income would, on average, be 12% higher each year during that period.⁷ Another study showed that if academic achievement in Pennsylvania matched that of the highest-ranked state in the country, Minnesota, in two generations our state's GDP per capita would be roughly 225% higher than it would be with current levels of academic achievement.

There is also research showing that the benefits of education are far more than economic. Higher education levels lead to increased political participation and stronger support for democratic practice and institutions. And there is also evidence that as educational attainment increases, infant mortality declines, life expectancy rises, and crime rates decline.⁸ All these things, of course, reduce the cost of government.

Public education is costly. As Thaddeus Stevens recognized, self-interest understood narrowly would lead us to skimp on public education so as to reduce our taxes. But that would be a short-sighted policy, one that the Republicans of Stevens's day—who represented the business community as they do now—rejected. Business people and their political advocates understood that their long-term self-interest, what Alexis De Toqueville called *self-interest rightly understood*, required them to invest heavily in education. Doing so not only strengthened our representative democracy but brought forth the educated and productive workers that both small and large businesses needed. And that set the stage for a growing economy that served everyone.

6. Eric Hanushek, Ludger Woessman, and Jens Ruhose, "It Pays to Improve School Quality," *Education Next*, Volume 16, No. 3, <https://www.educationnext.org/pays-improve-school-quality-student-achievement-economic-gain/>.

7. Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, and Ludger Woessmann, "Endangering Prosperity," Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

8. Emmanuela Gakidou, Krycia Cowling, Rafael Lozano, and Christopher Murray, "Increased educational attainment and its effect on child mortality in 175 countries between 1970 and 2009: a systematic analysis," *The Lancet*, 376 (9745): 959–974, 2010.

- Skills to succeed in college / higher education (post-secondary skills)
- How to think for themselves (critical thinking skills)
- How to interact with others (social skills)
- How to help their communities and make the world a better place (character/citizenship skills)
- How to manage their emotions and mental health (social-emotional skills)

Across geography, race, and class, there are more commonalities than differences in what parents and students want from their public schools. But we know that while brilliance, talent, and potential are equally distributed across the commonwealth, educational resources are not. When I asked my former student what could be better with public schools in Pennsylvania, without prompting, he named “funding” as the top thing that needs to change, saying, “It’s creating an unequal balance for kids.”

A System Defined by Inequity

Today, I want to emphasize the direct causal link from inequitable funding (resources) to inequitable educational opportunities (inputs) to inequitable educational outcomes. **Whether we focus on resources, inputs, or outcomes, Pennsylvania consistently is rated one of the most inequitable states in the country.**

To illustrate this point, I like to make an analogy to a baking competition – the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off – where contestants must bake the best cake. Contestant A is given cookbooks, state-of-the-art equipment, and a fully stocked pantry. Contestant B receives one grocery bag of expired ingredients, no recipes, and an Easy-Bake Oven. When A’s beautiful cake wins, some commentators blame Contestant B for not trying hard enough or not using her resources wisely, and question whether she really even deserved cake in the first place.

We can intuitively recognize the unfairness of such a system, but it’s nearly identical to our current approach to funding public schools in Pennsylvania. And the out-of-touch critiques of the commentators in this fictional bake-off aren’t that different from those made by lawyers defending the inequitable status quo in the school funding lawsuit, who [explained differences in outcomes between high-wealth and low-wealth districts](#) by saying that “some students are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities offered or perhaps are more industrious” and [questioned](#), “What use would someone on the McDonald’s career track have for Algebra 1?...There’s a need for retail workers, for people who know how to flip a pizza crust.”

As a former educator who taught in the underfunded Philadelphia public schools, I’ve taught — and loved — the students dismissed by lawmakers as less “industrious” and destined for the “McDonald’s track.” I’ve seen their curiosity, brilliance, ambition, and work ethic: Verónica, who dreamed of becoming a scientist and inventing new vaccines and miracle drugs; Bryan, who worked multiple jobs and still completed every homework assignment; Josh and Cashey, who started their own lunchtime book club to nerd out about their favorite pleasure reads. I’ve also seen the obstacles placed in their way, both by external factors like poverty and gun violence as well as the school system itself, which provides them fewer resources and opportunities than their peers in wealthier suburbs.

Inequitable Resources and Opportunities

We start off with inequitable resources: school districts in the wealthiest quintile spend \$6,200 more per pupil than the poorest school districts after adjusting for student need, according to Dr. Matt Kelly’s updated [analysis](#). Pennsylvania [ranks 42nd nationally in state share of overall education funding](#), and also [ranks 45th in terms of funding equity](#) according to the Education Law Center’s *Making the Grade* report.

These inequitable resources inevitably lead to inequitable educational opportunities, or inputs. **These inputs are measurable, and they consistently reveal that Pennsylvania has some of the greatest inequities in the country.** As my colleague David Lapp will highlight in greater detail in his testimony, when analyzing educational opportunity data from the federal Office of Civil Rights, [Research for Action found](#) that “Pennsylvania’s gaps in access to educational opportunity rank among the five worst nationwide in terms of both race and poverty.” These gaps were found across three indices: access to quality educators, access to

advanced coursework, and access to positive school climate. The researchers found that “this poor ranking is reflected across all three indices, with at least one race or income gap ranking 46th or worse, among the five least equitable states.”

Among the many inequities in access to educational opportunity caused by our inequitable funding system, I’d like to zoom in on the intersection of underfunding and educator staffing. Teach Plus has been actively been involved in efforts to address teacher shortages and expand and diversify the educator workforce in Pennsylvania over the past several years, including co-leading the [#PANeedsTeachers coalition](#) and leading the policy and advocacy efforts of the [Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium](#). Through our research and advocacy efforts, it’s become clear that **while educator shortages are a national trend, Pennsylvania’s teacher shortage crisis cannot be separated from its school funding inadequacy and inequity crisis**. While all districts in Pennsylvania are increasingly feeling the effects of a nationwide decline in interest in teaching and a diminishing educator pipeline, it’s underfunded districts that are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Without adequate resources, underfunded districts can’t keep up with wealthier districts in recruitment and retention of qualified educators in an increasingly constrained labor market. Specifically, research has revealed that the lowest-wealth and most inadequately funded districts in Pennsylvania:

- **Employ less-qualified teachers than adequately funded districts.** The most underfunded districts employ the highest percentages of novice teachers, out-of-field teachers, and emergency certified teachers. For example, compared to adequately funded districts, middle school students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of at least \$3,467 are nearly twice as likely to be taught by a novice teacher (three or fewer years of experience), 40% more likely to be taught by an out-of-field teacher, and nearly nine times more likely to be taught by an emergency certified teacher (see Figures 1-3 in Appendix).
- **Have higher rates of teacher attrition than high-wealth districts.** The teacher attrition rate for the lowest-wealth quintile of districts is nearly 50% higher than that of the wealthiest quintile (see Figure 4 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer classroom teachers per student than adequately funded districts.** In adequately funded districts, the average number of teachers per 1,000 students is 76.1, compared to an average of 64.8 students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 5 in Appendix).
- **Have lower average teacher salaries than high-wealth districts.** The average teacher salary in adequately funded districts is \$83,400, 24% higher than the average teacher salary of \$67,021 in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 6 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer support staff per student than adequately funded districts.** Adequately funded districts have more support staff per 1,000 students, on average, compared to inadequately funded districts. In particular, districts with “very high” per-student shortfalls have 23% fewer guidance counselors, 57% fewer librarians, and 8% fewer psychologists and social workers (see Figure 7 in Appendix).

To be sure, targeted investments in the teacher workforce are needed to reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, make the profession more attractive, improve teacher working conditions and opportunities for career advancement, and better retain teachers, as Teach Plus has advocated for and will continue to advocate for. But this data makes clear that the teacher shortage will not be solved until Pennsylvania’s school funding adequacy and equity problems are also addressed, because underfunded districts will never be able to compete with wealthier districts for the most qualified teachers until they are receiving adequate and equitable funding. **Since [teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement](#), it is critical to address funding inequities that contribute to staffing inequities if we hope to see student achievement in our most underfunded and underperforming schools improve.**

Inequitable Student Outcomes

Having established that Pennsylvania is among the most inequitable states in the country when it comes to both resources and inputs, we now turn to educational outcomes. **It should come as no surprise that Pennsylvania**

has some of the nation's widest racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. According to [an analysis by Dr. Ed Fuller](#) of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card, Pennsylvania had the largest socioeconomic achievement gaps in the country in 4th grade math, the third-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. In 4th grade reading, Pennsylvania had the fifth-largest socioeconomic achievement gap, the fourth-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. Additional analysis presented in the school funding trial made clear that these achievement gaps cannot be explained away by poverty or other out-of-school factors; low-income students do better academically in well-funded schools than they do in underfunded schools.

Again, you can draw a straight line from inequitable resources to inequitable learning opportunities to inequitable achievement outcomes. This aligns with everything the research tells us about how money matters in education, and how specific educational inputs, from access to pre-kindergarten to safe facilities, are directly correlated with student learning. **Given this research, it is unfair and cynical to decry the underachievement of students in underfunded districts while simultaneously refusing to give these districts the resources they need to hire sufficient numbers of qualified and well-prepared educators, update their facilities, expand access to pre-kindergarten, and provide equal educational opportunities to those provided in wealthier districts.** Like the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off, in Pennsylvania, our school funding system gives students from poor districts dramatically inferior inputs, but students and educators are expected to achieve the same achievement outcomes as their wealthy peers – and blamed for the system's failure when they do not.

The Historical Link Between School Funding and Student Achievement

If we look at Pennsylvania's performance on the Nation's Report Card over the past 25 years, we see that there was one period of dramatically improving student achievement across all grade levels and subjects. Between 2002 and 2011/13,¹ Pennsylvania NAEP scores increased significantly in every category, with particularly large gains for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (see Figure 8 in Appendix).

What accounted for this progress in the beginning of the 21st century? While many factors likely played a role, one critical factor was undoubtedly **Governor Ed Rendell's prioritization of increasing state funding for education as a top goal for his administration** – a goal he saw as inextricably linked to another of his top priorities, economic development. **During Rendell's two terms, Pennsylvania steadily increased both the amount and the state share of basic education funding, with three years of increases over 5.5%.** Importantly, while increases in state education funding benefited all school districts in Pennsylvania, funding increases were targeted and accelerated toward high-need districts in several ways that could help to specifically explain the closing of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps during this time. The use of adequacy targets ensured that the lowest-spending districts were receiving the most additional dollars from the state, and accountability block grants provided additional weighted funding for high-need students. Districts were also supported to invest new dollars into evidence-based interventions such as pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and tutoring, and were given support in understanding and responding to their achievement data in this new era of accountability. In addition to accountability, the state gave districts support to ensure they were making data-driven and research-supported decisions to improve instruction. According to [an analysis by Rendell's office](#), **“the districts in the state that received the biggest dollar increases showed the greatest reduction in students scoring ‘below basic’ on state tests, especially in math.”**

Unfortunately, starting in 2011/13, the achievement gains of the prior decade were reversed, and racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps widened again. This nosedive in achievement immediately followed the devastating cuts of nearly \$1 billion in state education funding in a single year under Governor Tom Corbett. These cuts triggered mass layoffs across the commonwealth and disproportionately impacted low-wealth districts, which were less able to make up for the state shortfall with local revenue. Many districts never fully recovered from the Corbett-era cuts in terms of staffing, and by the time overall state funding rebounded under

¹ In some categories, scores peaked in 2011, while others peaked in 2013.

Governor Tom Wolf, a growing teacher shortage was impairing the ability of all districts, and particularly low-wealth ones, to attract highly-qualified educators with the funding they received.

Goals for the Basic Education Funding Commission

The past provides us with a roadmap for the future. **If we want to see improved student achievement, economic growth, and a strong workforce in Pennsylvania, investing in adequate and equitable educational opportunities for all Pennsylvanian’s students is the best investment we as taxpayers can make.** The PA Schools Work coalition, of which Teach Plus is a member, has proposed [four criteria for success](#) that can function as a “report card” for this commission’s critical work of reforming our school funding system to pass constitutional muster:

First, the commission must set adequacy targets for all 500 districts. We won’t be able to assess our progress toward reaching the constitutional standard without first setting clear and evidence-based benchmarks for the cost of providing a “comprehensive, effective, contemporary education” for every child regardless of where they live. Adequacy targets set goals for funding levels for each district based on the spending levels of high-performing districts, adjusted based on measures of each district’s student needs. We won’t know how far we need to go or when we’ve reached adequacy without these targets. Dr. Kelly’s recently updated analysis, based on the General Assembly’s own methodology and updated to include critical factors including special education and mandated costs, should serve as a starting point.

Second, the commission must include resources for pre-K, special education, facilities, and transportation in its plan. Judge Jubelirer made clear in her ruling that low-wealth districts are shortchanged in all of these areas, and that they are each important factors in an adequate and equitable education. Therefore, although its original legislative mandate was limited to making adjustments to the basic education funding formula, the commission must go beyond basic education funding as it has been historically defined and incorporate these factors in order to fully address the lawsuit. The commission should estimate the costs of expanding pre-K, fully funding special education, ensuring facilities are safe and modern, and providing transportation, and include these costs in the overall funding targets it sets.

Third, the commission must set targets for the “state share” of overall funding targets. Pennsylvania’s state share of overall education funding is one of the lowest in the country, and many of the inequities in the current system are driven by the inability of low-wealth districts to raise enough revenue locally to adequately fund schools without unreasonably burdening taxpayers. The state must determine a fair share of overall education funding it will provide to close districts’ adequacy gaps, keeping in mind each district’s ability to raise local funding, and commit to funding the state share.

Finally, the commission must create a plan, with a reasonable timeline, for the state to close its share of the adequacy gap. This plan should start with the 2024-25 state budget and require no more than 3-5 years to reach full implementation and pass constitutional muster. It should also include increases in state funding to keep pace with inflation in future years.

If this commission fails to meet any of the above criteria, it will have failed to meet its constitutional duty, and it will be the public school students of Pennsylvania who will suffer the consequences. This will not be an easy task. However, I have had the opportunity to meet most of you on the commission individually over the past several years, and I believe in your commitment to Pennsylvania’s students. I believe you ran for public office not to do what’s easy or popular, but to do what’s right, and to make our commonwealth stronger.

A Call to Action

Since we’re in Lancaster today, I’d like to reflect on the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens, one of my personal heroes, from whom my older son got his middle name. In addition to fighting fiercely at the federal level against slavery and for passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, Stevens was a fierce advocate for public education. He saw public education as essential to a functioning democracy, a tool for fighting poverty

and creating economic mobility, and inextricably tied to the fights for racial equality and justice. As a legislator in the Pennsylvania General Assembly prior to his election to Congress, he was most proud of his efforts to institute a statewide, free public education system and his successful defense of the new system when critics tried to repeal it. As with his stances on racial equality, **his support for public education was seen as radical in his day, but he is now recognized as ahead of his time – on the right side of history.** In his 1835 speech that is credited with stopping the repeal of our new public education system, he said to his fellow legislators:

*“It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the nineteenth century, of entering into a formal argument, to prove the utility, and, to free governments, **the absolute necessity of education**...If, then, education be of admitted importance to the people, under all forms of government, and of unquestioned necessity, when they govern themselves, it follows, of course, that its cultivation and diffusion is **a matter of public concern, and a duty which every government owes to its people**...*

*“Pennsylvania's sons possess as high native talents as any other nation of ancient or modern time. **Many of the poorest of her children possess as bright intellectual gems if they were as highly polished as did the scholars of Greece or Rome. But too long, too disgracefully long, has coward, trembling, procrastinating legislation permitted them to lie buried in dark, unfathomable caves.** If you wish to acquire popularity, how often have you been admonished to build not your monuments of brass or marble but make them of ever-living mind...*

*“All these things would be easily admitted by almost every man, **were it not for the supposed cost.** I have endeavored to show that it is not expensive; but, admit that it were somewhat so, **why do you cling so closely to your gold?... Who would not rather do one living deed than to have his ashes forever enshrined in ever-burnished gold?***

*“...I trust that when we come to act on this question we shall all take lofty ground - look beyond the narrow space which now circumscribes our visions - beyond the passing, fleeting point of time on which we stand; and **so cast our votes that the blessing of education shall be conferred on every son of Pennsylvania** - shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freemen, and lay on earth a broad and a solid foundation for that enduring knowledge which goes on increasing through increasing eternity.”*

While the century is different, the responsibility this commission faces is just as great, and many of the pressures on you are the same as those facing the General Assembly nearly 200 years ago. In many ways, the future of public education is in your hands, just as it was in theirs.

As in the 1830s, some have balked at the costs of fixing our inadequate and inequitable system, questioning when enough will be enough, and why student achievement hasn't improved in the past few years despite recent increases in education funding. But an inadequate and inequitable system, created over decades, cannot be fixed overnight. **Even with recent increases, many underfunded districts, including those that have hosted the first four hearings, are still grossly underfunded** – Allentown by almost \$10,000 per student, Harrisburg by over \$10,000, Philadelphia by nearly \$8,000, and Lancaster by \$4,600. While recent steps in the right direction have narrowed adequacy gaps, these steps have been insufficient, and it was just this year that the Commonwealth Court found our funding system unconstitutional and discriminatory – a ruling that was not appealed and now stands as this commission's charge and call to action. And the costs of failing to adequately educate our commonwealth's students – those gems in need of polishing – are even greater.

This commission did not create our inadequate and inequitable system, but you have inherited it, and now have a choice whether to perpetuate it or reform it. The time for action is long overdue, as “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” It is long past time to fix our unconstitutional state system for funding public education, and the eyes of the children of Pennsylvania are on this commission, waiting for justice.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your commitment to Pennsylvania's children.

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Elementary School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy²

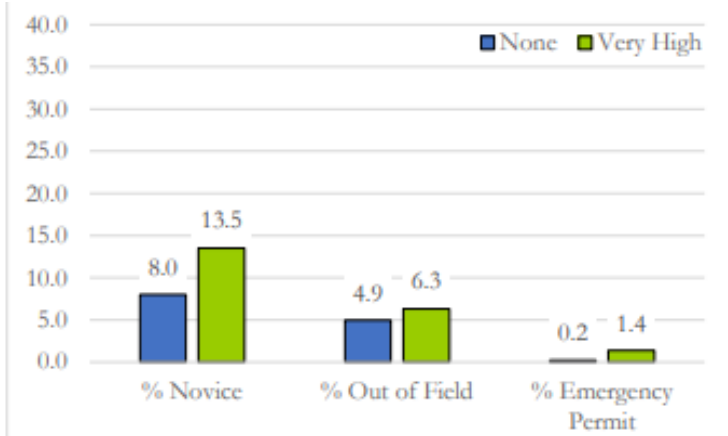


Figure 2: Middle School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy³

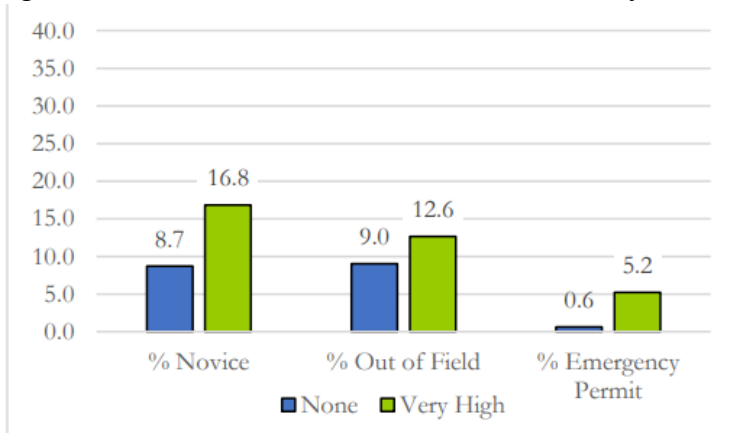
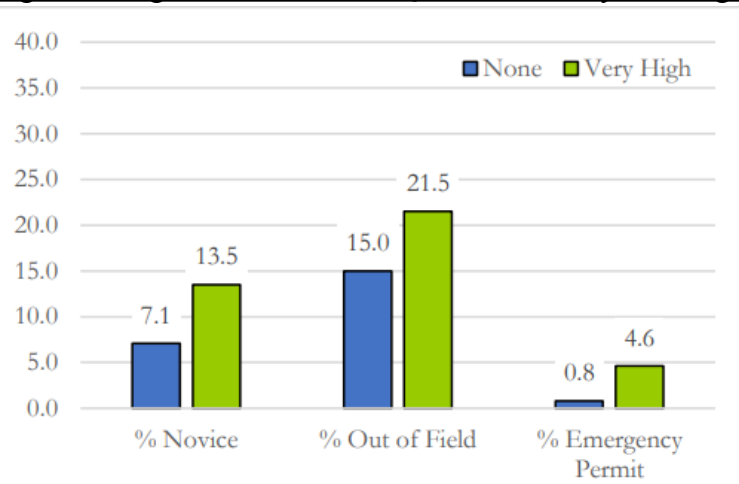


Figure 3: High School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy⁴



² Analysis by Ed Fuller, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [The Inequitable Distribution of Teacher Quality in Pennsylvania](#).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Figure 4: Teacher Attrition by District Wealth (2022 to 2023)⁵

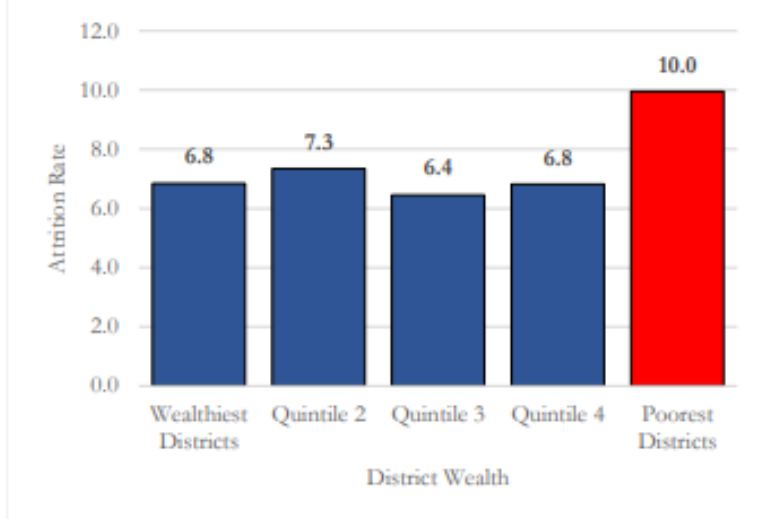


Figure 5: Teachers Per 1,000 Students in Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20⁶

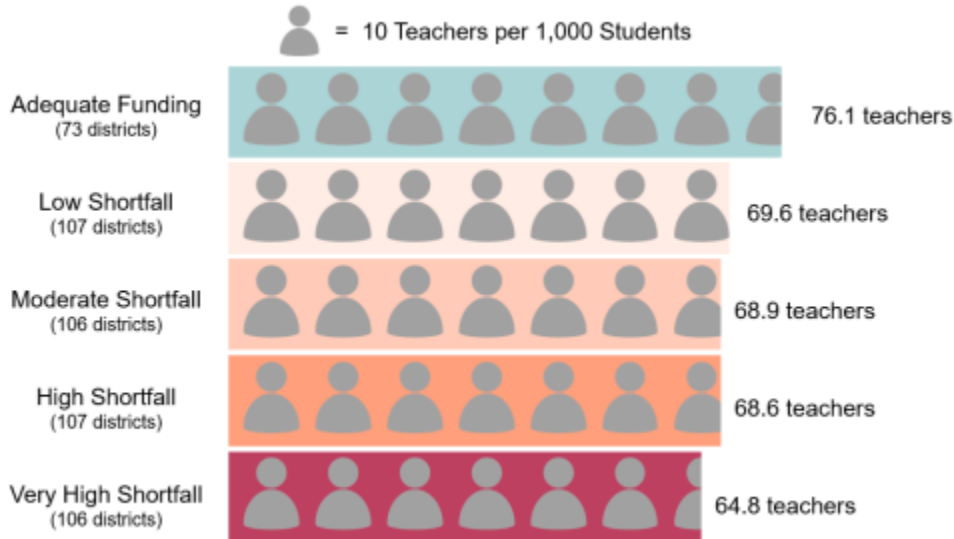
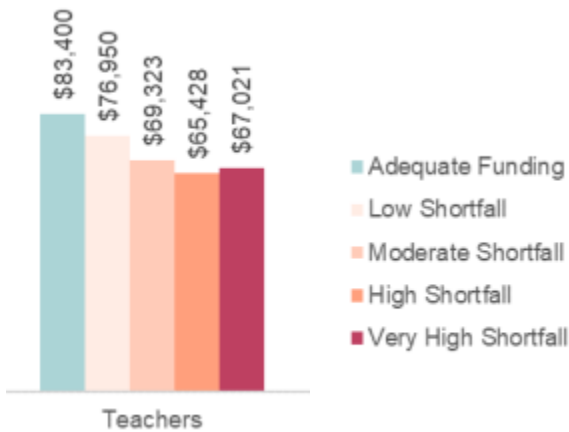


Figure 6: Average Teacher Salaries by District Funding Adequacy Per Pupil, 2019-20⁷



⁵ Analysis by Ed Fuller, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [Exacerbating the Shortage of Teachers: Rising Teacher Attrition in Pennsylvania from 2014 to 2023](#).

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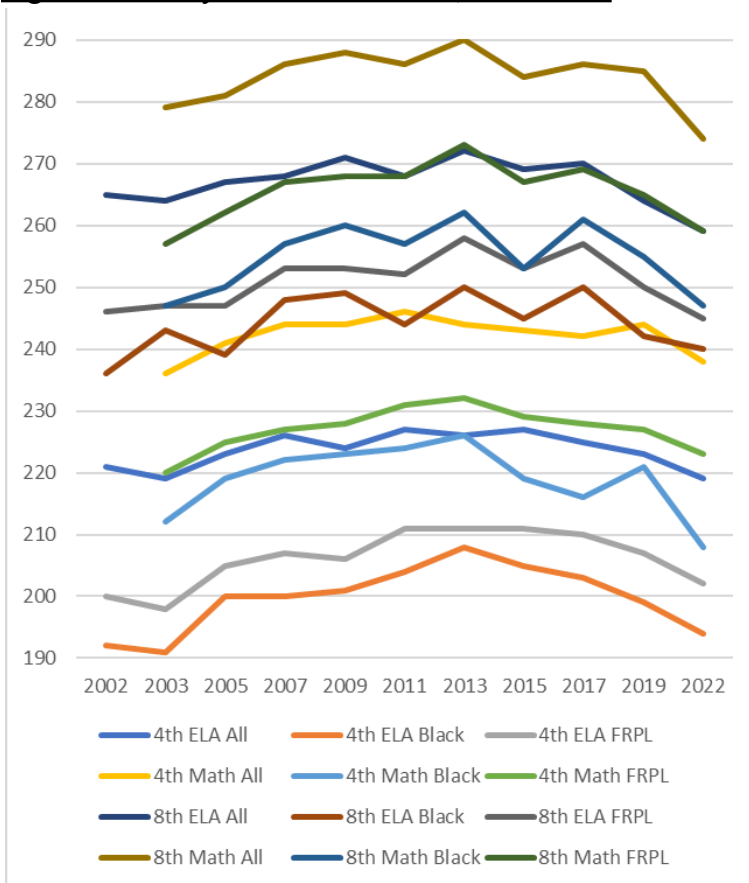
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Figure 7: Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students in Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20⁸

Type of Professional Support Staff	Number of Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students With Percent Difference from Level in Adequate Funding Districts				
	Adequate Funding (73 districts)	Low Shortfall (107 districts)	Moderate Shortfall (106 districts)	High Shortfall (107 districts)	Very High Shortfall (106 districts)
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Library Sciences	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.1 -21%	1.0 -29%	0.6 -57%
School Nurses	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.2 -14%	1.1 -21%	1.4 0%
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Unspecified Professional Student Support Staff	1.8	1.6 -11%	1.4 -22%	1.1 -39%	3.7 +106%

Note: Numbers may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Figure 8: Pennsylvania NAEP Data, 2002-2022⁹



⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Analysis by Laura Boyce, data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

**Written testimony of Laura Boyce, Teach Plus Pennsylvania Executive Director,
before the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission
Thursday, September 21, 2023, Lancaster, PA**

Chairman Sturla, Chairwoman Phillips-Hill, and members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Laura Boyce, and I'm the Executive Director of Teach Plus Pennsylvania. I started my career as a high school English and social studies teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, and was also an elementary and middle school principal in Camden, NJ prior to my current role. I'm also the parent of two sons who will attend public schools in Philadelphia in a few short years.

[Teach Plus](#) is a national education non-profit that empowers excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

Envisioning an Equitable Education System

What does an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success look like? This month, Teach Plus teachers across the commonwealth have been holding focus groups with students and families to understand their aspirations for students' futures, how they define a successful and good life, what role they believe schools should play in helping students achieve their dreams, and how they think our education system is currently doing in fulfilling this role.

While the full report won't be available for several months – it will be completed around the same time as this commission's report – what we've heard so far is illuminating. **Overwhelmingly, whether they are from urban, suburban, or rural areas, from wealthy or underfunded districts, parents and students have big dreams for the future.** Students speak about pursuing passions, obtaining financial stability and generational wealth, and changing their communities. Parents dream of their children becoming independent, happy, psychologically strong, and fulfilled in their careers. The idea of realizing students' full potential is one that has been repeated in almost every group.

Last week, I had the opportunity to speak to one of my former students, whom I taught at an underfunded high school in North Philadelphia, who is now a father to two young boys. He told me about how inquisitive, perceptive, and caring his children are. He described his dreams for his kids: "I just want them to be happy doing whatever they want, whether that's being a teacher or being a doctor or being a police officer, whatever it is, as long as they're able to maximize their full potential. And whatever they love doing, I don't want them to just do something as a job... I want them to be able to do what they're passionate about and be successful at that. I want them to be looked at from society as respectable, helpful, caring to others, having empathy for others." I was struck by his responses, not only because I was proud of the great father he's become, but because his aspirations for his children are so similar to the ones I have for my own two sons of about the same age.

Communities' dreams for their children's futures are sky-high all across Pennsylvania, and there is also commonality in communities' expectations that public schools will be the vehicles that allow children to achieve these dreams. When they speak about their expectations for schools, parents and students talk about the need for access and exposure to new subjects and experiences, their desire for caring and skilled educators, and the importance of creating relationships and a sense of belonging and community to ensure all students can learn. Overwhelmingly, they view it as "very important" that schools teach students all of the following:

- Core subjects like reading, writing, math, and science (academic skills)
- Skills for future jobs and careers (vocational skills)

- Skills to succeed in college / higher education (post-secondary skills)
- How to think for themselves (critical thinking skills)
- How to interact with others (social skills)
- How to help their communities and make the world a better place (character/citizenship skills)
- How to manage their emotions and mental health (social-emotional skills)

Across geography, race, and class, there are more commonalities than differences in what parents and students want from their public schools. But we know that while brilliance, talent, and potential are equally distributed across the commonwealth, educational resources are not. When I asked my former student what could be better with public schools in Pennsylvania, without prompting, he named “funding” as the top thing that needs to change, saying, “It’s creating an unequal balance for kids.”

A System Defined by Inequity

Today, I want to emphasize the direct causal link from inequitable funding (resources) to inequitable educational opportunities (inputs) to inequitable educational outcomes. **Whether we focus on resources, inputs, or outcomes, Pennsylvania consistently is rated one of the most inequitable states in the country.**

To illustrate this point, I like to make an analogy to a baking competition – the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off – where contestants must bake the best cake. Contestant A is given cookbooks, state-of-the-art equipment, and a fully stocked pantry. Contestant B receives one grocery bag of expired ingredients, no recipes, and an Easy-Bake Oven. When A’s beautiful cake wins, some commentators blame Contestant B for not trying hard enough or not using her resources wisely, and question whether she really even deserved cake in the first place.

We can intuitively recognize the unfairness of such a system, but it’s nearly identical to our current approach to funding public schools in Pennsylvania. And the out-of-touch critiques of the commentators in this fictional bake-off aren’t that different from those made by lawyers defending the inequitable status quo in the school funding lawsuit, who [explained differences in outcomes between high-wealth and low-wealth districts](#) by saying that “some students are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities offered or perhaps are more industrious” and [questioned](#), “What use would someone on the McDonald’s career track have for Algebra 1?...There’s a need for retail workers, for people who know how to flip a pizza crust.”

As a former educator who taught in the underfunded Philadelphia public schools, I’ve taught — and loved — the students dismissed by lawmakers as less “industrious” and destined for the “McDonald’s track.” I’ve seen their curiosity, brilliance, ambition, and work ethic: Verónica, who dreamed of becoming a scientist and inventing new vaccines and miracle drugs; Bryan, who worked multiple jobs and still completed every homework assignment; Josh and Cashey, who started their own lunchtime book club to nerd out about their favorite pleasure reads. I’ve also seen the obstacles placed in their way, both by external factors like poverty and gun violence as well as the school system itself, which provides them fewer resources and opportunities than their peers in wealthier suburbs.

Inequitable Resources and Opportunities

We start off with inequitable resources: school districts in the wealthiest quintile spend \$6,200 more per pupil than the poorest school districts after adjusting for student need, according to Dr. Matt Kelly’s updated [analysis](#). Pennsylvania [ranks 42nd nationally in state share of overall education funding](#), and also [ranks 45th in terms of funding equity](#) according to the Education Law Center’s *Making the Grade* report.

These inequitable resources inevitably lead to inequitable educational opportunities, or inputs. **These inputs are measurable, and they consistently reveal that Pennsylvania has some of the greatest inequities in the country.** As my colleague David Lapp will highlight in greater detail in his testimony, when analyzing educational opportunity data from the federal Office of Civil Rights, [Research for Action found](#) that “Pennsylvania’s gaps in access to educational opportunity rank among the five worst nationwide in terms of both race and poverty.” These gaps were found across three indices: access to quality educators, access to

advanced coursework, and access to positive school climate. The researchers found that “this poor ranking is reflected across all three indices, with at least one race or income gap ranking 46th or worse, among the five least equitable states.”

Among the many inequities in access to educational opportunity caused by our inequitable funding system, I’d like to zoom in on the intersection of underfunding and educator staffing. Teach Plus has been actively been involved in efforts to address teacher shortages and expand and diversify the educator workforce in Pennsylvania over the past several years, including co-leading the [#PANeedsTeachers coalition](#) and leading the policy and advocacy efforts of the [Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium](#). Through our research and advocacy efforts, it’s become clear that **while educator shortages are a national trend, Pennsylvania’s teacher shortage crisis cannot be separated from its school funding inadequacy and inequity crisis**. While all districts in Pennsylvania are increasingly feeling the effects of a nationwide decline in interest in teaching and a diminishing educator pipeline, it’s underfunded districts that are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Without adequate resources, underfunded districts can’t keep up with wealthier districts in recruitment and retention of qualified educators in an increasingly constrained labor market. Specifically, research has revealed that the lowest-wealth and most inadequately funded districts in Pennsylvania:

- **Employ less-qualified teachers than adequately funded districts.** The most underfunded districts employ the highest percentages of novice teachers, out-of-field teachers, and emergency certified teachers. For example, compared to adequately funded districts, middle school students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of at least \$3,467 are nearly twice as likely to be taught by a novice teacher (three or fewer years of experience), 40% more likely to be taught by an out-of-field teacher, and nearly nine times more likely to be taught by an emergency certified teacher (see Figures 1-3 in Appendix).
- **Have higher rates of teacher attrition than high-wealth districts.** The teacher attrition rate for the lowest-wealth quintile of districts is nearly 50% higher than that of the wealthiest quintile (see Figure 4 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer classroom teachers per student than adequately funded districts.** In adequately funded districts, the average number of teachers per 1,000 students is 76.1, compared to an average of 64.8 students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 5 in Appendix).
- **Have lower average teacher salaries than high-wealth districts.** The average teacher salary in adequately funded districts is \$83,400, 24% higher than the average teacher salary of \$67,021 in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 6 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer support staff per student than adequately funded districts.** Adequately funded districts have more support staff per 1,000 students, on average, compared to inadequately funded districts. In particular, districts with “very high” per-student shortfalls have 23% fewer guidance counselors, 57% fewer librarians, and 8% fewer psychologists and social workers (see Figure 7 in Appendix).

To be sure, targeted investments in the teacher workforce are needed to reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, make the profession more attractive, improve teacher working conditions and opportunities for career advancement, and better retain teachers, as Teach Plus has advocated for and will continue to advocate for. But this data makes clear that the teacher shortage will not be solved until Pennsylvania’s school funding adequacy and equity problems are also addressed, because underfunded districts will never be able to compete with wealthier districts for the most qualified teachers until they are receiving adequate and equitable funding. **Since [teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement](#), it is critical to address funding inequities that contribute to staffing inequities if we hope to see student achievement in our most underfunded and underperforming schools improve.**

Inequitable Student Outcomes

Having established that Pennsylvania is among the most inequitable states in the country when it comes to both resources and inputs, we now turn to educational outcomes. **It should come as no surprise that Pennsylvania**

has some of the nation's widest racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. According to [an analysis by Dr. Ed Fuller](#) of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card, Pennsylvania had the largest socioeconomic achievement gaps in the country in 4th grade math, the third-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. In 4th grade reading, Pennsylvania had the fifth-largest socioeconomic achievement gap, the fourth-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. Additional analysis presented in the school funding trial made clear that these achievement gaps cannot be explained away by poverty or other out-of-school factors; low-income students do better academically in well-funded schools than they do in underfunded schools.

Again, you can draw a straight line from inequitable resources to inequitable learning opportunities to inequitable achievement outcomes. This aligns with everything the research tells us about how money matters in education, and how specific educational inputs, from access to pre-kindergarten to safe facilities, are directly correlated with student learning. **Given this research, it is unfair and cynical to decry the underachievement of students in underfunded districts while simultaneously refusing to give these districts the resources they need to hire sufficient numbers of qualified and well-prepared educators, update their facilities, expand access to pre-kindergarten, and provide equal educational opportunities to those provided in wealthier districts.** Like the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off, in Pennsylvania, our school funding system gives students from poor districts dramatically inferior inputs, but students and educators are expected to achieve the same achievement outcomes as their wealthy peers – and blamed for the system's failure when they do not.

The Historical Link Between School Funding and Student Achievement

If we look at Pennsylvania's performance on the Nation's Report Card over the past 25 years, we see that there was one period of dramatically improving student achievement across all grade levels and subjects. Between 2002 and 2011/13,¹ Pennsylvania NAEP scores increased significantly in every category, with particularly large gains for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (see Figure 8 in Appendix).

What accounted for this progress in the beginning of the 21st century? While many factors likely played a role, one critical factor was undoubtedly **Governor Ed Rendell's prioritization of increasing state funding for education as a top goal for his administration** – a goal he saw as inextricably linked to another of his top priorities, economic development. **During Rendell's two terms, Pennsylvania steadily increased both the amount and the state share of basic education funding, with three years of increases over 5.5%.** Importantly, while increases in state education funding benefited all school districts in Pennsylvania, funding increases were targeted and accelerated toward high-need districts in several ways that could help to specifically explain the closing of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps during this time. The use of adequacy targets ensured that the lowest-spending districts were receiving the most additional dollars from the state, and accountability block grants provided additional weighted funding for high-need students. Districts were also supported to invest new dollars into evidence-based interventions such as pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and tutoring, and were given support in understanding and responding to their achievement data in this new era of accountability. In addition to accountability, the state gave districts support to ensure they were making data-driven and research-supported decisions to improve instruction. According to [an analysis by Rendell's office](#), **“the districts in the state that received the biggest dollar increases showed the greatest reduction in students scoring ‘below basic’ on state tests, especially in math.”**

Unfortunately, starting in 2011/13, the achievement gains of the prior decade were reversed, and racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps widened again. This nosedive in achievement immediately followed the devastating cuts of nearly \$1 billion in state education funding in a single year under Governor Tom Corbett. These cuts triggered mass layoffs across the commonwealth and disproportionately impacted low-wealth districts, which were less able to make up for the state shortfall with local revenue. Many districts never fully recovered from the Corbett-era cuts in terms of staffing, and by the time overall state funding rebounded under

¹ In some categories, scores peaked in 2011, while others peaked in 2013.

Governor Tom Wolf, a growing teacher shortage was impairing the ability of all districts, and particularly low-wealth ones, to attract highly-qualified educators with the funding they received.

Goals for the Basic Education Funding Commission

The past provides us with a roadmap for the future. **If we want to see improved student achievement, economic growth, and a strong workforce in Pennsylvania, investing in adequate and equitable educational opportunities for all Pennsylvanian’s students is the best investment we as taxpayers can make.** The PA Schools Work coalition, of which Teach Plus is a member, has proposed [four criteria for success](#) that can function as a “report card” for this commission’s critical work of reforming our school funding system to pass constitutional muster:

First, the commission must set adequacy targets for all 500 districts. We won’t be able to assess our progress toward reaching the constitutional standard without first setting clear and evidence-based benchmarks for the cost of providing a “comprehensive, effective, contemporary education” for every child regardless of where they live. Adequacy targets set goals for funding levels for each district based on the spending levels of high-performing districts, adjusted based on measures of each district’s student needs. We won’t know how far we need to go or when we’ve reached adequacy without these targets. Dr. Kelly’s recently updated analysis, based on the General Assembly’s own methodology and updated to include critical factors including special education and mandated costs, should serve as a starting point.

Second, the commission must include resources for pre-K, special education, facilities, and transportation in its plan. Judge Jubelirer made clear in her ruling that low-wealth districts are shortchanged in all of these areas, and that they are each important factors in an adequate and equitable education. Therefore, although its original legislative mandate was limited to making adjustments to the basic education funding formula, the commission must go beyond basic education funding as it has been historically defined and incorporate these factors in order to fully address the lawsuit. The commission should estimate the costs of expanding pre-K, fully funding special education, ensuring facilities are safe and modern, and providing transportation, and include these costs in the overall funding targets it sets.

Third, the commission must set targets for the “state share” of overall funding targets. Pennsylvania’s state share of overall education funding is one of the lowest in the country, and many of the inequities in the current system are driven by the inability of low-wealth districts to raise enough revenue locally to adequately fund schools without unreasonably burdening taxpayers. The state must determine a fair share of overall education funding it will provide to close districts’ adequacy gaps, keeping in mind each district’s ability to raise local funding, and commit to funding the state share.

Finally, the commission must create a plan, with a reasonable timeline, for the state to close its share of the adequacy gap. This plan should start with the 2024-25 state budget and require no more than 3-5 years to reach full implementation and pass constitutional muster. It should also include increases in state funding to keep pace with inflation in future years.

If this commission fails to meet any of the above criteria, it will have failed to meet its constitutional duty, and it will be the public school students of Pennsylvania who will suffer the consequences. This will not be an easy task. However, I have had the opportunity to meet most of you on the commission individually over the past several years, and I believe in your commitment to Pennsylvania’s students. I believe you ran for public office not to do what’s easy or popular, but to do what’s right, and to make our commonwealth stronger.

A Call to Action

Since we’re in Lancaster today, I’d like to reflect on the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens, one of my personal heroes, from whom my older son got his middle name. In addition to fighting fiercely at the federal level against slavery and for passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, Stevens was a fierce advocate for public education. He saw public education as essential to a functioning democracy, a tool for fighting poverty

and creating economic mobility, and inextricably tied to the fights for racial equality and justice. As a legislator in the Pennsylvania General Assembly prior to his election to Congress, he was most proud of his efforts to institute a statewide, free public education system and his successful defense of the new system when critics tried to repeal it. As with his stances on racial equality, **his support for public education was seen as radical in his day, but he is now recognized as ahead of his time – on the right side of history.** In his 1835 speech that is credited with stopping the repeal of our new public education system, he said to his fellow legislators:

*“It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the nineteenth century, of entering into a formal argument, to prove the utility, and, to free governments, **the absolute necessity of education**...If, then, education be of admitted importance to the people, under all forms of government, and of unquestioned necessity, when they govern themselves, it follows, of course, that its cultivation and diffusion is **a matter of public concern, and a duty which every government owes to its people**...*

*“Pennsylvania's sons possess as high native talents as any other nation of ancient or modern time. **Many of the poorest of her children possess as bright intellectual gems if they were as highly polished as did the scholars of Greece or Rome. But too long, too disgracefully long, has coward, trembling, procrastinating legislation permitted them to lie buried in dark, unfathomable caves.** If you wish to acquire popularity, how often have you been admonished to build not your monuments of brass or marble but make them of ever-living mind...*

*“All these things would be easily admitted by almost every man, **were it not for the supposed cost.** I have endeavored to show that it is not expensive; but, admit that it were somewhat so, **why do you cling so closely to your gold?... Who would not rather do one living deed than to have his ashes forever enshrined in ever-burnished gold?***

*“...I trust that when we come to act on this question we shall all take lofty ground - look beyond the narrow space which now circumscribes our visions - beyond the passing, fleeting point of time on which we stand; and **so cast our votes that the blessing of education shall be conferred on every son of Pennsylvania** - shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freemen, and lay on earth a broad and a solid foundation for that enduring knowledge which goes on increasing through increasing eternity.”*

While the century is different, the responsibility this commission faces is just as great, and many of the pressures on you are the same as those facing the General Assembly nearly 200 years ago. In many ways, the future of public education is in your hands, just as it was in theirs.

As in the 1830s, some have balked at the costs of fixing our inadequate and inequitable system, questioning when enough will be enough, and why student achievement hasn't improved in the past few years despite recent increases in education funding. But an inadequate and inequitable system, created over decades, cannot be fixed overnight. **Even with recent increases, many underfunded districts, including those that have hosted the first four hearings, are still grossly underfunded** – Allentown by almost \$10,000 per student, Harrisburg by over \$10,000, Philadelphia by nearly \$8,000, and Lancaster by \$4,600. While recent steps in the right direction have narrowed adequacy gaps, these steps have been insufficient, and it was just this year that the Commonwealth Court found our funding system unconstitutional and discriminatory – a ruling that was not appealed and now stands as this commission's charge and call to action. And the costs of failing to adequately educate our commonwealth's students – those gems in need of polishing – are even greater.

This commission did not create our inadequate and inequitable system, but you have inherited it, and now have a choice whether to perpetuate it or reform it. The time for action is long overdue, as “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” It is long past time to fix our unconstitutional state system for funding public education, and the eyes of the children of Pennsylvania are on this commission, waiting for justice.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your commitment to Pennsylvania's children.

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Elementary School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy²

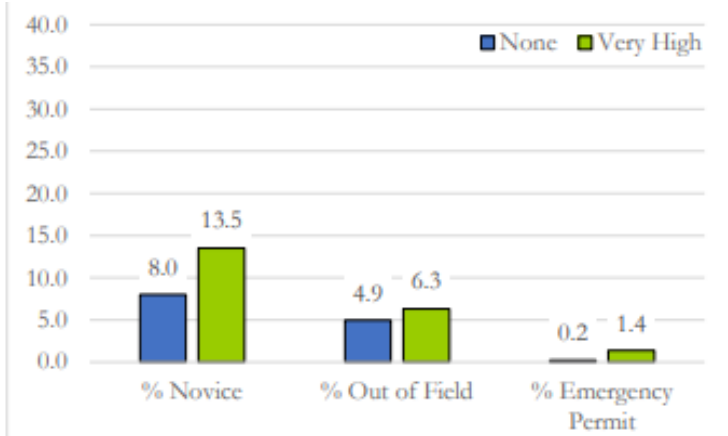


Figure 2: Middle School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy³

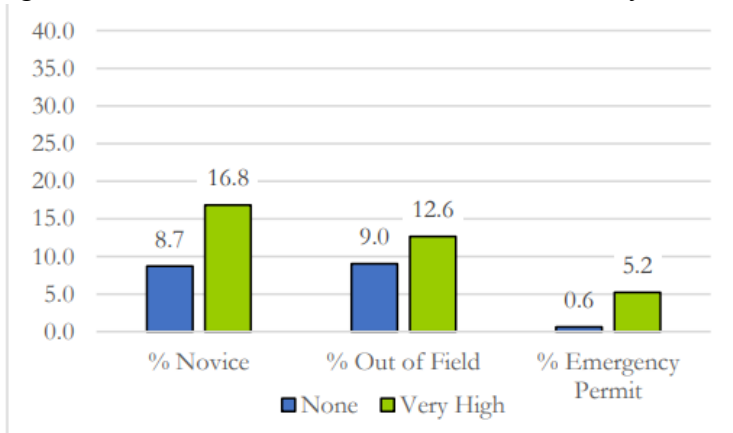
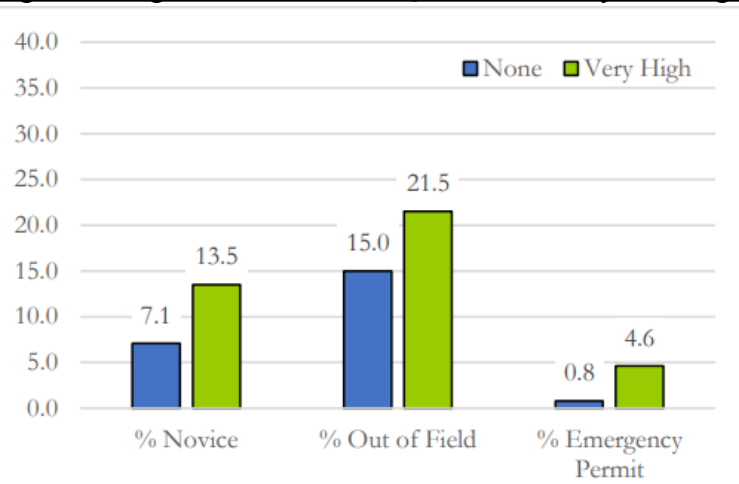


Figure 3: High School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy⁴



² Analysis by Ed Fuller, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [The Inequitable Distribution of Teacher Quality in Pennsylvania](#).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Figure 4: Teacher Attrition by District Wealth (2022 to 2023)⁵

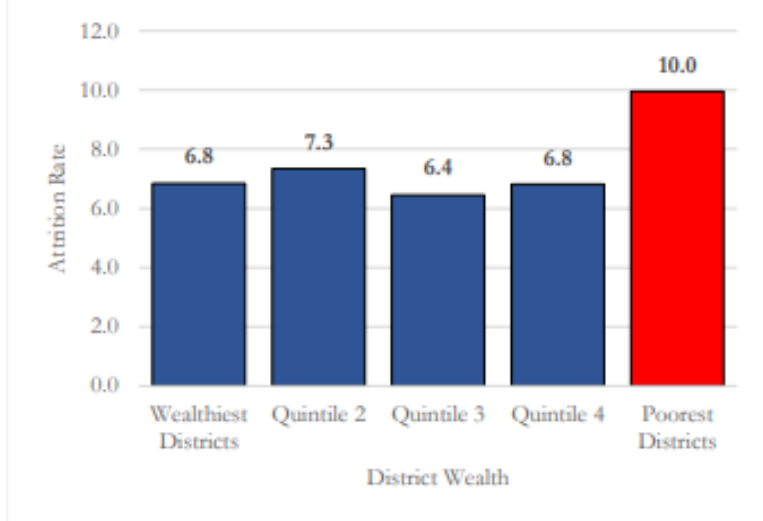


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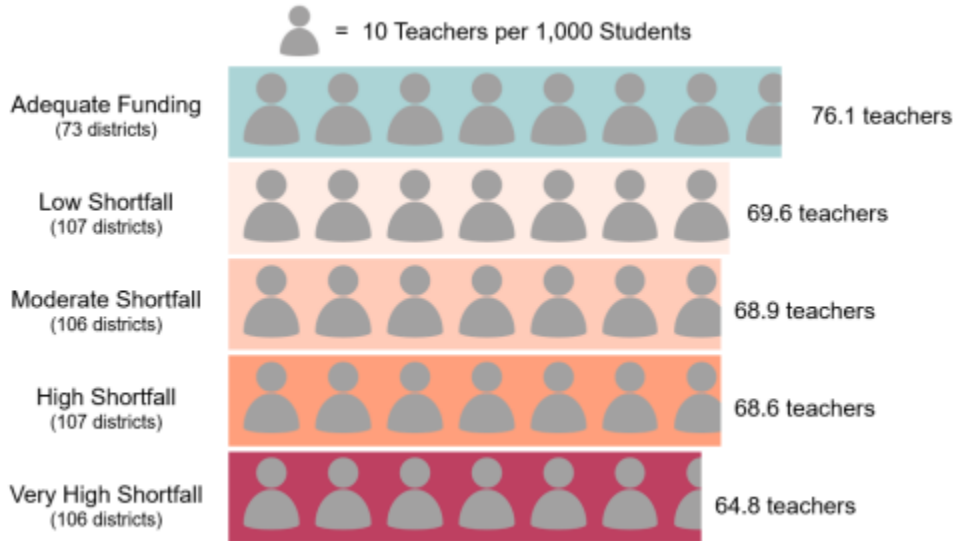
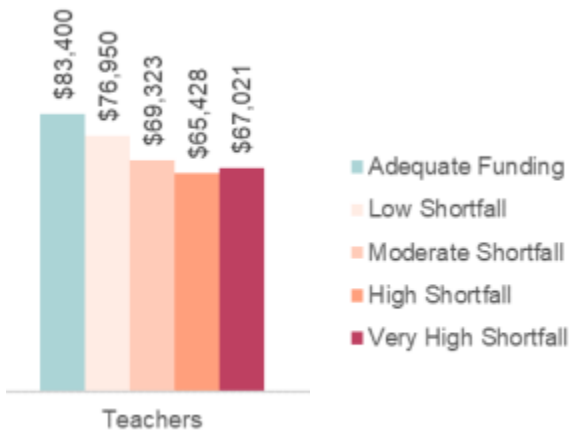


Figure 6: Average Teacher Salaries by District Funding Adequacy Per Pupil, 2019-20⁷



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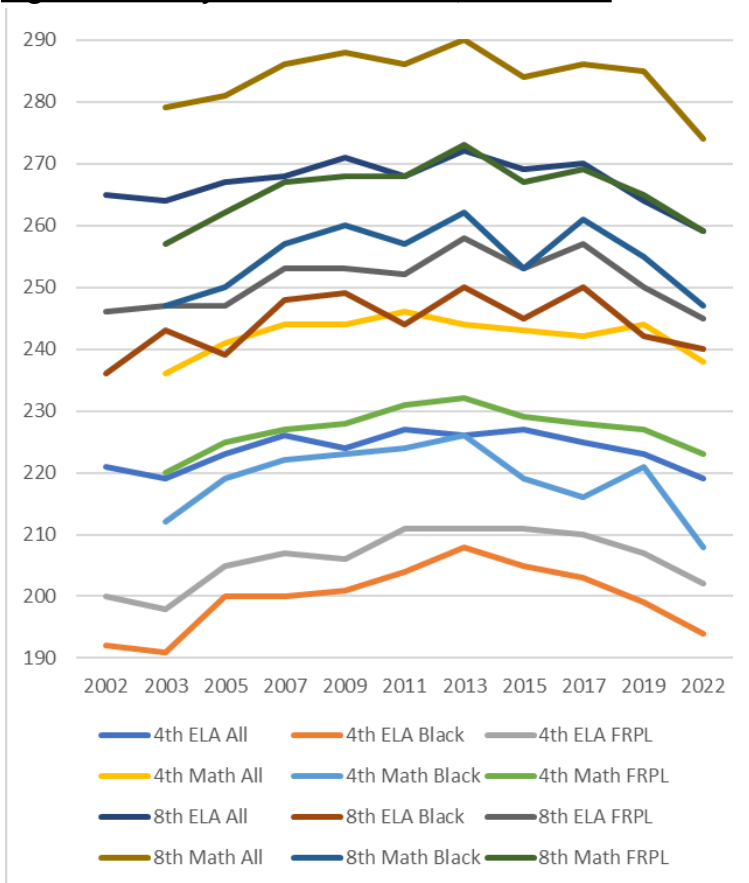
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Figure 7: Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students in Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20⁸

Type of Professional Support Staff	Number of Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students With Percent Difference from Level in Adequate Funding Districts				
	Adequate Funding (73 districts)	Low Shortfall (107 districts)	Moderate Shortfall (106 districts)	High Shortfall (107 districts)	Very High Shortfall (106 districts)
All Professional Support Staff	9.9	8.6 -13%	8.1 -18%	7.5 -24%	9.7 -2%
Guidance Counselors	3.1	2.8 -10%	2.7 -13%	2.6 -16%	2.4 -23%
Library Sciences	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.1 -21%	1.0 -29%	0.6 -57%
School Nurses	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.2 -14%	1.1 -21%	1.4 0%
Psychologists, Social Workers, Home/ School Visitors	1.2	1.1 -8%	1.0 -17%	0.9 -25%	1.1 -8%
Support Supervisors, Coordinators, Specialists	0.9	0.8 -11%	0.7 -22%	0.7 -22%	0.4 -56%
Physical/Occupational Therapists, Dental Hygienists	0.1	0.1 0%	0.1 0%	0.1 0%	0.1 0%
Unspecified Professional Student Support Staff	1.8	1.6 -11%	1.4 -22%	1.1 -39%	3.7 +106%

Note: Numbers may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Figure 8: Pennsylvania NAEP Data, 2002-2022⁹



⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Analysis by Laura Boyce, data from the National Center for Education Statistics.



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF KRISTEN HAASE
TEACH PLUS SENIOR POLICY FELLOW AND SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LANCASTER TEACHER
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA BASIC EDUCATION FUNDING COMMISSION

Thursday, September 21, 2023
Lancaster, PA

Chairman Sturla, Chairwoman Phillips-Hill, and members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kristen Haase, and I teach English Language Development (ELD) to the multilingual learners of Carter & MacRae Elementary School in the School District of Lancaster. I am also a Senior Policy Fellow with Teach Plus, a national non-profit organization whose mission is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Through Teach Plus, I've had the opportunity to bring my expertise as an educator to discussions about education policy and to build relationships with legislators in both houses and from both parties over the past two years.

As some of you may have heard in my testimony at the House Education Committee hearing on August 10th, I have been a part of the School District of Lancaster as a teacher as well as an assessor of reading for over 20 years, but I live just five miles away in Manheim Township, where my son is a ninth grader. The disparities in education funding I've seen across these two school districts, separated by just five miles, have opened my eyes to the need to level the playing field between underfunded and affluent districts.

Manheim Township is a small, wealthy community whose schools are frequently rated on national best-of lists from U.S. News and World Report and Newsweek. The district recently completed construction of a new \$43.6 million middle school building, which my son got to attend the past two years. The middle school has a black box theater, state-of-the-art science labs, Smartboards in every classroom, and a TV projection room with tens of thousands of dollars of equipment. When my son recently went on a field trip to Washington, DC, the school chartered buses with air conditioning and bathrooms on board so they could travel in comfort. Everything about my son's educational environment and experience signals to him, "You matter. Your future matters. Your dreams matter. Your education is important and worth investing in."

In my district, we have to budget and save for every repair. We still have buildings without air conditioning, which become stiflingly hot and dangerous on hot days, and overcrowded schools that use trailers to service ELD students or to provide counseling services. When I started my career teaching English Language Development 20 years ago, my classroom was a maintenance closet, and even today, two of my ELD colleagues teach out of the library and two of us share a classroom because there's no space for us to have our own classrooms. When I watch my son play soccer on pristine turf fields, I can't help but think of my students who go out for recess on a blacktop surface and risk injury just by being a kid. If we get to go on field trips, which my students have to pay out-of-pocket for, we aren't taking charter buses; we are riding on yellow school buses without air conditioning or seat belts.

These inequities would seem unfair even if our districts were serving similar populations. However, the needs of students in my district are much greater than those of students in Manheim Township. In Manheim Township, 29% of students are economically disadvantaged, 14% require special education services, and 4% are English language learners. In SDoL, 88% of our students are economically disadvantaged, 19% require special education services, and 20% are English language learners. This is not coincidental: the poorest 20% of school districts – those designated as Level Up districts – serve 58% of the state's economically disadvantaged students, 64% of its English language learners, and 35% of its students with disabilities. In other words, the

students with the greatest needs in our commonwealth are disproportionately concentrated in the districts with the fewest resources relative to student need.

I work with multilingual learners, and the research is very clear that my students can be successful, but that they do require additional resources to help them succeed. In my school, we have over 120 English language learners, many of whom are newcomers to the country who speak little to no English, and some of whom also have moderate to severe disabilities including autism. If you have ever learned another language, you know it takes years to master. You also understand the importance of quality teaching and resources in order to be fluent. Many students need hours and hours of individualized support to learn English. Without enough staff to provide this support, my students, who are smart and eager to learn, will not be able to even access the curriculum to learn the other critical academic skills they need to succeed when they leave us. As the school funding lawsuit found, my students, who need the most, get the least because of where they live.

The students and staff of the School District of Lancaster are capable, but they need resources – time, money, and personnel – to be successful. We deserve a level playing field to compete, but it often feels that the deck is stacked against us. And I know that we are not alone in feeling that way. As a Teach Plus Policy Fellow, I contributed to a report, [*Funding Our Future*](#), based on focus groups with over 100 teachers across Pennsylvania. In our analysis, we found that underfunding leads to crumbling school infrastructure, negatively impacts student and teacher mental health, hinders districts’ ability to recruit and retain educators, and limits academic opportunities and resources.

In many districts, underfunding means outdated and sometimes unsafe school facilities that hinder learning. In my Teach Plus colleagues’ schools in Philadelphia and Scranton, schools have been closed for weeks and months due to asbestos, lead, and other hazards. One of my colleagues spoke of the 108-year-old school where he teaches in Philadelphia being closed for asbestos exposure – twice. That turbulence brought fear and uncertainty for over two months. The students and staff were abruptly relocated to a new space far from home. Families had unanswered questions about their toxic school, concerns about travel, and fears around safety and gun violence in a distant neighborhood. The school community later learned that they had been exposed to asbestos for the previous two years, and that they will live with the threat of cancer and other health consequences for the rest of their lives. Can you imagine this happening in wealthier districts or our own children’s school? No, we can’t because it wouldn’t. In the School District of Lancaster, there are still buildings without air conditioning. I remember assessing students’ reading skills in a classroom where the temperature was 96 degrees. The afternoon sun created oven-like conditions. The students were on the floor to stay cool. Some were asleep. To this day, I still remember sweating through my clothes and feeling dehydrated, and I was only in the room for a few moments. Imagine your son or daughter being expected to learn and perform in these types of conditions on a regular basis during the beginning and end of the school year.

In many districts, underfunding means insufficient guidance counselors and other mental health staff at a time when student mental health is at a crisis point. According to the most recently available data from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, the School District of Lancaster’s ratio of students to counselors is 346 to 1. The American School Counselor Association’s recommended ratio is 250 to 1, and that doesn’t even account for the additional trauma and toxic stress my students are exposed to due to poverty, violence, newcomer status, and other challenges. One teacher in our focus groups said, “We lost almost all of our counselors in the 2013 budget cut layoffs and never got them all back. We have five for a school of 2,700 students. A couple of years ago, we had several suicides and attempted suicides and not enough professionals to help. These mental health duties then fall to teachers.” Another teacher described a student whose family was already struggling before the pandemic and whose situation got much worse during the pandemic: “His behaviors are a result of enduring trauma during the pandemic and he now comes to school strictly to eat, feel warm, and be loved. He would benefit tremendously from the support of a mental health professional or the School Based Behavioral Health Team, but he doesn’t have access because our understaffed programs are at capacity. So instead, he spends much of his time in my calming area, tucked under a blanket, getting the sleep he desperately needs, while I

return to teaching the other 22 students in front of me instead of receiving the support of a mental health professional.”

In many districts, underfunding means we are unable to compete with wealthier districts to attract and retain great teachers. In the School District of Lancaster, almost 25% of our teaching staff have less than three years of experience; for Manheim Township and wealthier districts, that percentage is under 9%. A worsening teacher shortage has intensified competition between districts for a shrinking supply of educators, and underfunded districts are fighting a losing battle, unable to offer competitive salaries and forced to increase class sizes and caseloads as vacancies increase. One teacher in our focus groups said, “We cannot compete with larger districts, county-wide systems, or areas that have more economic opportunities for new-hires. Why would someone choose our small, rural, financially strapped district, when they can go somewhere else and be paid a decent wage?” With more resources, underfunded districts could increase teacher pay, fill vacant positions, hire more specialized teachers, lower class sizes, and reduce educator workloads. Since we know teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement, being able to recruit and retain more highly-qualified educators would mean we would see more students meeting grade-level standards, graduating, and attending college—with positive ripple effects on our entire community and economy.

Finally, in many districts, underfunding means being unable to provide our students with equal academic opportunities and resources to those provided in wealthier neighboring communities, hindering student learning and achievement. One teacher in our focus groups said, “Updated curriculum materials for math, science, and social studies are needed. Our school district is using a math curriculum that is no longer supported by the publisher, and is not rigorous enough for students to meet grade level mathematics standards.” Other teachers talked about how their districts couldn’t afford reading specialists, sufficient special education support staff, librarians, technology classes, and advanced courses. With more resources, we could update our textbooks and other instructional materials, provide tutoring for any student who needs extra help to reach grade level, and offer more AP, dual enrollment, and career-and-technical education classes to help our students prepare for college and career and compete in a global economy.

It is urgent that this Commission takes action to fix our state’s unconstitutional school funding system to ensure both adequacy and equity. To accomplish this goal, I urge the Commission to take the following actions:

- First, determine the total cost to meet the constitutional standard. This is accomplished by establishing a meaningful adequacy target for each school district as part of the formula that determines how much each district needs to provide its children with a comprehensive, effective, contemporary education, and how the funds will be distributed to the districts.
- Next, calculate funding targets that also address unmet needs beyond K-12 basic education funding that were identified by the Court as critical to ensuring meaningful opportunities for all PA public school students, such as facilities, special education, and pre-K.
- Third, ensure that the state meets its constitutional obligation by establishing a fair and equitable “state share” for those targets so that low-wealth school districts can reach adequate funding at a reasonable tax effort.
- Finally, create a plan, with a reasonable timeline, for the state to meet its share of those targets – a roadmap for the governor and state legislature to meet their constitutional mandate.

By taking the four steps above, you will send my students – and students in underfunded districts across Pennsylvania – the same message my son receives: “You matter. Your future matters. Your dreams matter. Your education is important and worth investing in.”

Thank you for your consideration.

Power Interfaith: An Inside Perspective

Testimony of Dominique Botto

I first came across Power Interfaith when they came to my elementary school's PTO meeting. I was a parent first, but a paraprofessional working first hand in the public school system.

When I was told about the funding crisis and how certain districts had to go without because of their racial and economic demographic, it angered me. As a child who grew up in the public schools system and who now is raising their own child in that very same system, I thought, "*Why should he go without because of his zip code?*" "*Why are teachers struggling and having to provide their own funding for their classrooms when I can go ten minutes down the road and see already well off families getting even more?*" Most importantly, I thought, "*What can I do to help make a difference?*"

We are here today to shed light on some of the struggles that I see my students and their families go through. Whether that's not having the proper transportation in the schools with children having to navigate and walk all while making sure that they are at school on time. Not having adequate before and after school programs for those parents who work odd hours and can't make it to the school by a certain time. I've had to walk or wait with many kids after school to ensure that they get home safely.

We live in a very diverse district, Lancaster City is home to many different nationalities and hues, that's what makes our city so great. However, we want and need to be able to understand the language barriers, so we can be accommodating to these new families that have chosen to call our city home. That means we need funding to be able to pay interpreters at school and in the community! These things will not pay for themselves and I believe that if we can properly pay qualified individuals for this role, they will do it! I work with a colleague who is Spanish speaking who has expressed this concern. She is a Building Assistant who gets pulled from her duties to translate and her pay should reflect that. I have another colleague who has to pull her phone out to use Google Translate to be able to try and

communicate with her student, all while trying to lead a class of about 20 kindergartners.

What was eye opening to me during the summer programs was the amount of families that asked if they could have extra food. These are very hard times and some people just are just barely making it in our district.

On the other end of the food spectrum, I'm concerned with our school lunches as we give the same portions to a kindergartner as we do a 5th grader. Many of these kids are going hungry throughout the day which directly affects their ability to learn and focus properly throughout the day. I can't help but to notice that these richer districts have way more options at hand. *Why don't we?*

Those are just a few of my concerns as I understand we are on a time restraint, but I could go on about the things I see in the district and in the community. I'm not sure if you have children Mr. Sterla, but imagine trading just a few days with a family of five that just moved here and is trying to get on their feet. Shouldn't their education be just as important as your own children? Children are our future and it doesn't matter what color they are or how much money their families have. Fair is fair and we just want a fair chance for our kids, that's all.

Thank you for your time. We will fight this fight until change comes!

Testimony of Brenda Morales

Good morning. My name is Brenda Morales, I am a leader with Power Interfaith and a retired School District of Lancaster educator. I taught English as a Second Language for 22 years in the district. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of students and teachers.

Why do we need a better funding formula, one that fully and fairly funds all schools? We don't have enough time for me to explain all the reasons, so I'll sprint through a few things that I would like to see change.

Facilities with appropriate temperature. You can't imagine how miserable it is to work in extreme heat or cold. I used to keep a pile of sweatshirts for days when the boiler system was acting up, but there wasn't anything I could do on super-hot day. Studies have found that extreme temperatures impact a student's (and teacher's) ability to focus.

Class size. Imagine 30 third grade students. I co-taught in a class of that size. Believe me when I say that is a lot of children. Children with fewer chances to interact with their teacher. Fewer chances to get help. And lower academic success as a result.

Better lunches. My husband went to Reynolds Middle School in the 80s. He said the lunch was never enough, he was still hungry. For some kids, my husband was one of them, school breakfast and lunch is the only reliable food they get. We need to make the lunches taste better and have larger portions for the older students.

Finally, English Learners, also called ELs. The School District of Lancaster has nearly 2000 ELs or about 16% of the student population. This is a challenging group to work with because of the diversity of their previous schooling and their life experiences. A migrant student from Guatemala is very different from a Congolese refugee or a student from Puerto Rico who had a good education there. Yet, they are in the same class.

ELs, especially beginners, need smaller classes. For several years, I had beginner classes of 14 or 15 students. Sometimes, my ESL class was larger than the regular English class. It was extremely difficult to meet the needs of that many students.

I know that many people think we already spend too much money on education and think we don't need an increase. I would like to remind everyone of the \$800 million budget cuts in 2011. I remember colleagues finding out they were no longer employed. We lost nurses, librarians, Spanish teachers, PE teachers. Schools in the School District of Lancaster still share librarians and nurses. We have yet to make up for that deficit in funding. This is why we need full and fair funding. To ensure the students in districts like the School District of Lancaster have the same advantages as students in rich suburban schools.

A proponent of public education that is important to Lancaster County was Thaddeus Stevens. He left money to create a school for indigent orphans, with no preference based on race, religion, or ethnicity. He also spoke in defense of public education, saying it is a matter of public concern and a duty the government owes its citizens. He further said that the blessing of education should be for all children, that the poorest child needs to be prepared to take part as an educated citizen.

I ask that the members of the Commission ensure that these ideals continue and that every child has access to the best possible education. Thank you.

Testimony of Reverend Dr. Gregory J. Edwards Chief of Staff - POWER INTERFAITH

Good Morning, I'm Reverend Dr. Gregory J. Edwards. I serve as pastor of Resurrected Life Community Church, United Church of Christ in the city of Allentown. I hold the role of Executive at the church's community development corporation, RCDC, which provides high-quality early learning and school-age educational programs for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, students, and their families in Lehigh and Northampton Counties.

Moreover, I am the Chief of Staff for POWER INTERFAITH; Pennsylvania's largest multiracial, multi-faith community organizing entity with over 200 congregations from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Quaker, Bahai, and Ethical Humanist traditions. We are people of moral courage organizing and working to promote racial and economic justice on a livable planet and have organized chapters in the Lehigh Valley, Central Pennsylvania, as well as Philadelphia and the city's surrounding collar counties.

For the past decade, we've been deeply committed to the cause of securing full and equitable funding for Pennsylvania's public schools. Research from several of our key leaders, including David Mosenkis, has been used as expert testimony to verify the inherent, appalling inequities that exist within our public schools – inequities that persist because of the current allocation of funds sanctioned by the state's legislature.

FUNDING INEQUITY AND ITS DAMAGING RESULTS

Multiple studies have shown that Pennsylvania's school districts have more significant racial and class achievement gaps in student learning than nearly any other state.

As just one example, the race and class disparities exposed within the William Penn SD vs. Pa Department of Education Commonwealth Court case demonstrate that school districts receiving **the most** revenue in Pennsylvania are disproportionately white, while districts receiving **the least** revenue are disproportionately Black and LatinX; Moreover, 50% of all Black students and 40% of all Latinx students in the Commonwealth attend the most underfunded schools in PA's lowest-wealth districts.

We have to face the facts: Whether because of neglect or malice, the state legislature's failure to enact equitable funding has and continues to perpetuate racial inequality in Pennsylvania. We are an outlier because of choices made by political decision- and policy makers.

To be blunt, our political leaders have been holding the hopes, dreams, and future of scores of PA's children hostage because of a lack of political will to do right by all our children.

I'm reminded of Dr. King's words, "*We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structures of reality.*"

In other words, if one part of our human ecosystem is unwell, we are all negatively affected. Likewise, if all parts of our community are healthy and cared for, we all thrive.

What we choose to do or not do in this moment to address ongoing racial and structural inequities – inequalities perpetuated by a refusal to equitably fund Pennsylvania's public schools – will ultimately impact all our state's children...not just poor or Black or Brown children. And therefore it will inevitably impact all communities, economically and otherwise.

Creating an equitable Pennsylvania School System doesn't mean that white students lose because Black and Brown students win; it means all students have the resources they need to thrive, be successful, and reach their full potential in learning and life. When we all win, we all win.

CALL TO ACTION

Today, I make a confident plea on behalf of those united in a movement for education justice. I speak not merely to your intellects, but to your hearts and your commitment to justice. We call upon all elected members of the general assembly and, in particular, the distinguished members of this commission, to take decisive action to fully fund our public education system.

As you have heard today, you have the support of the public and the mandate of a court case backing you up on this. The evidence is overwhelming: Pennsylvania's public schools face an immediate and unconstitutional crisis of racial, economic, and educational justice.

The General Assembly holds the key to our children's future, and it is their moral duty to unlock the doors of opportunity for every child in Pennsylvania, regardless of their zip code, family income, or skin color. We must have full funding for our public education system: It is not a choice but a fundamental right currently being denied – and an ongoing threat to our state's prosperity, reputation, and moral fabric.

The Basic Education Funding budget must be distributed equitably, bridging the gaps that have persisted for far too long. Only through fair public school funding can we resolve the inequities that have plagued our communities for decades.

But it cannot end there. We implore you to develop a comprehensive solution to Pennsylvania's unconstitutional school funding system immediately. Let us set a concrete timeline for compliance by the 2024-2025 school year. We cannot afford to allow the chronic underfunding of public schools in Black, brown, and lower-income neighborhoods to persist any longer.

In closing, I offer my prayers and hopes for each of you. May you find the strength to face the challenges that lie ahead. May you have the courage to engage in the necessary but difficult conversations. Please be open to listening and learning from the voices of those most affected by these disparities. And, above all, may you hold hope in your hearts, not just for your own children but for all of Pennsylvania's children. Together, we can create a brighter and more equitable future for our beloved Commonwealth. Thank you.

Basic Education Funding Commission

Dr. Keith Miles Jr. | Superintendent | School District of Lancaster

Progress and Possibilities: The transformative impact of adequate and predictable school funding

September 21, 2023

Good morning/afternoon commission members. The School District of Lancaster is pleased to host your hearing today. My name is Keith Miles and I am the superintendent. Thank you Chair Phillips-Hill and Chair Sturla for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I commend you for your leadership on the issue of school funding, which is critically important to our students, communities and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

First, let us all acknowledge two facts that research proves and the Basic Education Funding Formula affirms: School districts enrolling more children from low-income families and more English language learners need more resources to equalize educational opportunity. Yet these are the same districts that are at a disadvantage in raising revenues.

In the School District of Lancaster, about 90 percent of our students come from economically disadvantaged families. About one in five of our students speaks a language other than English, which is more than seven times as many as the average of the other districts in this county.

As a district, we are committed to closing these gaps, for we believe every child deserves and excellent education. And we recognize that the cycle of poverty perpetuated by inadequate education creates a financial burden on taxpayers that grows over time.

But it takes resources *now*, often in the form of skilled professionals, to do this work. As I shared with the House Education Committee, our district spends:

- \$6.5 million on early childhood education to close school readiness gaps;
- \$3 million on extended day, after school and summer programs to close learning gaps;
- \$3 million on social work and community schools to support our students and families who are under-resourced; and
- nearly \$3 million on college and career supports, including school-to-work programs and college counseling—not including our regular school counseling—to close postsecondary gaps.

We spend \$11.5 million annually on our programs for English Language Learners, larger than the entire basic education funding subsidy for two-thirds of our neighboring school districts in Lancaster County.

These investments, which together total more than \$20 million, are essential, in high demand, and in some cases insufficient.

Thanks to recent increases in funding, we were able to add a paraeducator to every kindergarten classroom in the district. These aides work closely with students to ensure they're acquiring the necessary foundational skills to succeed in school. For example, [name] checked in with a paraeducator

three times a day based on social-emotional learning goals. [they] also participated in small groups and moved up two levels in reading in [their] kindergarten year alone.

The hard reality is, without this funding, students like [name] would not make the same progress.

We also added academic interventionists at the elementary level. These professionals work individually and in small groups with students in grades K through two who need additional help in math and language arts outside of the classroom. I can tell you many stories of students, like [name] who, after eight weeks of intensive daily reading with an interventionist, was able to return to the classroom reading with her peers.

The fact is, we recognize a similar need for interventionists to work with our middle school students, specifically in math where too many students are falling short of their targets. But we do not have the resources.

At the same time, some of our facilities *still* lag behind, nearly 15 years after our district began a master construction plan. In fact, we had to call four days of early dismissals for students at three schools during a recent heat wave because their schools do not have air conditioning or proper ventilation. These schools lost important instructional time because the buildings are too uncomfortable for serious teaching and learning. None of our suburban peers face a similar challenge.

Yet we have been chronically underfunded—by tens of millions of dollars over the past decade—according to the Legislature’s own formula for school district need.

That’s why we were one of six school districts, seven parents, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools and the NAACP Pennsylvania State Conference to win a historic victory in Commonwealth Court, when a judge ruled that Pennsylvania’s school funding system is unconstitutional and harms school districts with the most need.

Much of the Court’s decision was based upon the Commonwealth’s own laws and statistics. It relied on the Level Up formula, which combines both the fair funding and special education formulas’ definitions of need to determine which districts are spending the least in the state relative to those needs. For example, the School District of Lancaster is spending the 28th *least* in the Commonwealth.

I have a unique perspective on this, because I served in New Jersey as a principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent. New Jersey offers a window into our future if we do not heed the court’s call.

In 1981, the Education Law Center filed a complaint in New Jersey’s Superior Court challenging New Jersey’s system of financing public education. It represented 20 students attending low-income schools in the state. The case, which became known as *Abbott v. Burke* ultimately reached the New Jersey Supreme Court.

In 1990, the state Supreme Court found the state’s system of funding unconstitutional as applied to children in 31 “poorer urban” school districts. I worked at three of what are now known as “Abbot Districts”—Camden, Trenton and Bridgeton, where I recently was superintendent.

In response to the ruling the state Legislature modestly increased aid levels for Abbot districts, but failed to provide parity. So in 1994, the Supreme Court ordered the Legislature to assure “substantial equivalence” in funding within two years. Again the Court found the Legislature’s response insufficient.

Ultimately, the Court took it upon itself to direct a comprehensive set of remedial measures to ensure an adequate and equal education for low-income school children. By the mid-2000s, when funding to the Abbot districts was being scaled up, New Jersey saw its largest gains in student achievement for economically disadvantaged students.

New Jersey serves as both a cautionary tale of what can happen if a legislature does not abide by the clear rulings of a court. But it also serves as an example of the transformative impact of adequate school funding.

Finally, let me close with a plea for predictability. Crafting a school district budget takes time. Responsible school budgeting does not happen overnight—or even in one year. Strong institutions have multi-year plans that allow time for investments to show impact.

Our current system is at odds with this time-tested approach. We begin our budget process without knowing our state funding for the coming year. School boards must approve their budgets before the Legislature passes a state budget.

So, even when the state does provide necessary additional resources, the impact is delayed.

I call on this commission, and the Legislature at large, to study ways to provide school districts with a sustainable, long-term, and *predictable* plan for how it will adequately fund schools.

Thank you.

Basic Education Funding Commission

Matt Przywara | Assistant Superintendent | School District of Lancaster

Unlocking Potential: The Crucial Role of Adequate Education Funding in Pennsylvania and Its Impact on the School District of Lancaster

September 21, 2023

Good morning commission members, fellow colleagues, and guests joining us here today in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My name is Matt Przywara, and I am the assistant superintendent at the School District of Lancaster. Among my responsibilities is the oversight of finance and operations, as I was previously the CFO in the district for 16 years and I am before you again, nine years later to continue our discussion on a matter of paramount importance - the significance of adequate education funding, particularly through the lens of basic education and what it means not only for the School District of Lancaster, but for all students in the Commonwealth.

Education is the cornerstone of a thriving society. It's the key that unlocks the doors to opportunity, drives innovation, and fuels social progress. In the 21st century, the value of a quality education cannot be overstated. Yet, the path to providing this quality education is paved with challenges, especially in districts such as the School District of Lancaster.

The concept of basic education funding is not just about dollars and cents; it's about investing in our most precious resource - our children. Adequate funding is the lifeblood of an effective educational system. It enables schools to attract and retain talented educators, maintain up-to-date facilities, and provide students with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly complex world. For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, this funding is not an expense; it's an investment in the future.

Today I want to illustrate our annual struggle with a structural deficit caused by expenses that rise faster than our tax base can keep pace, causing disproportionately high real estate tax rates which is exacerbated by the inadequate funding from the state.

Our expenses continue to rise in the form of human capital resources. We are a service-driven organization that relies on the many talents of our educators and support staff in our schools. Our students are in need of far greater services than that of our neighboring peers and that is why we need to invest more each year into our people and programs at the local level. We are a transparent and values-driven organization that is very mindful of any additional tax burden we place on our local community. We are outpaced on the amenities our close peers have such as state-of-the-art facilities, instructional resources, and athletic fields all of which are critical to an educational experience our students should expect to be prepared to compete for college and career opportunities.

Our local tax revenue is largely static. Our district is landlocked, with a dwindling amount of space to add new development that would grow our tax base. At the same time, more than a quarter of a billion dollars in property value in our district—30 percent of all properties—are tax-exempt, including hospitals, colleges, churches, and economic development projects. Though we receive voluntary payments from some of these owners, it is tens of millions of dollars less than their full property-tax bills would be.

The impact of all of this is a disproportionately high millage rate for our homeowners that raises far less revenue than lower rates in more affluent districts.

For example, in 2021-22 the New Hope-Solebury School District, on the New Jersey border near Doylestown with just over 1,300 students, has a local tax rate that generates more than \$30,141

in local revenue per student. When you add in the district's BEF per student of \$990 per student they generate more than \$31,000 in combined state and local revenue per student.

By comparison, in the School District of Lancaster, our tax rate only generates \$9,611 per student from our local revenue. With the additional state funding (including Level Up) of \$6,500 per student, we are only able to generate a combined total of \$16,000 per student. The disparities in this example are one of many when comparing the funding for schools in the Commonwealth.

As my colleague Dr. Miles noted earlier, nearly 90% of our students are economically disadvantaged, and one in five students, or nearly 2,000, speak a language other than English.

In New Hope School District, 10% of students are economically disadvantaged. Approximately 25 kids speak a language other than English.

Only through predictable, consistent, and adequate funding mechanisms like Basic Education Funding can we provide our students with the resources they need to access the education they deserve.

Adequate education funding in Lancaster means smaller class sizes, which allows for more individualized attention and better learning outcomes. It means well-equipped classrooms with the latest technology and resources, so students can prepare for a future where technology is integral. It means extracurricular programs that nurture talents and interests outside the classroom, creating well-rounded individuals ready to tackle the challenges of tomorrow. And it means state-of-the-art facilities where students, staff, and community can come together to be their very best, while not having to combat factors such as unregulated temperatures in classrooms, failing electrical systems, and teaching our students with the most learning needs in closets, hallways, detached trailers and the like.

However, the impact of adequate funding goes beyond the immediate benefits. It's an investment in the entire community. A well-educated workforce attracts businesses, stimulates economic growth, and ultimately strengthens the fabric of society. It reduces crime rates and reliance on social services, leading to a more prosperous and stable community for everyone.

The struggle for adequate funding in education is ongoing, and it requires the collective effort of citizens, policymakers, and educators. It's about making education a priority, not just in words but in actions and budget allocations. As we start each and every budget presentation in the School District of Lancaster, our budget is an expression of our values. It is time for the Commonwealth to express its collective values and invest in education by making a meaningful and concerted effort to move this process forward. It's about recognizing that the future of our state and our nation depends on the quality of education we provide today.

In closing, let us remember that adequate education funding through basic education is not a luxury; it's a necessity. It's a commitment to the future, a commitment to equality of opportunity, and a commitment to the well-being of our communities. By investing in education, we are investing in a brighter, more equitable future for Pennsylvania and the School District of Lancaster.

Thank you.