

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,

Christopher Dormer
Superintendent of Schools
Norristown Area School District