

Basic Education Funding Commission Testimony
Superintendent Dr. Carol D. Birks
Tuesday, September 12, 2023

Good morning, esteemed members of the Basic Education Funding Commission and fellow attendees.

Providing equitable funding for urban school districts is a matter of social equity and fairness. The Education Law Center and the Civil Rights Project at UCLA have conducted research highlighting how funding disparities disproportionately affect marginalized communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

Today I stand before you to address the importance of equitable funding for the 16,761 dynamic and sensational students who attend the Allentown School District.

I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to a matter of paramount importance – the physical infrastructure of Pennsylvania’s public schools. As we gather to discuss the equitable delivery of education in our state's public schools, it is imperative that we recognize the critical role that school facilities play in fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth for all students and creating supportive working conditions for our educators and staff.

The Allentown School District serves as a microcosm of the challenges many districts across our Commonwealth face with regard to aging school infrastructure. Our district is comprised of different facilities - which includes 21 schools where students are taught each day. Of those schools, two thirds of which are more than 50 years old, with a startling 12 buildings that have exceeded the century mark.

While we have diligently carried out renovations and maintenance of our buildings, the truth remains that these aging structures struggle to accommodate the demands of a modern, 21st-century educational setting.

Our *District Wide Feasibility Study* has determined that, structurally, our buildings remain sound. Yet, the passage of time has left them with physical deficiencies that hinder our ability to provide the quality education our students deserve. In the wake of new building codes and safety standards, our facilities face challenges that were unforeseen when they were originally constructed. The cost of addressing these deficiencies is projected to exceed \$400 million, a staggering amount of required investment for our single district, with out state aid. Historically, Allentown has been underfunded, to the tune of \$200 million per year.

Among the most pressing issues, our schools contain outdated mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection systems – as well as non-existent air conditioning in many of our oldest buildings. In total, these concerns collectively contribute to over 70% of the estimated investment cost required to address our buildings' deficiencies.

Before observers might suggest that the Allentown School District hasn't done enough to remedy these deficiencies, let me remind them that our taxpayers face the highest school tax rate in the county and we are doing as much as we can given our property tax base. The citizens of Allentown are doing their part, and the School District is doing its part. But the deck has been stacked against us for decades.

The answer, clearly, is the immediate reform of Pennsylvania's unconstitutional school funding system as ruled by the Commonwealth Court back in February. Allentown needs action today.

In the meantime, we are reminded about how funding inequities lead directly to inequities for our students and their families. Just last week, the extreme heat and the lack of air conditioning in our oldest schools led to four half days for Allentown students. As a result, our students had less learning time and parents had to scramble for child care and transportation. Dismissing 3 hours early, for four days in a row has led to 12 hours of lost instructional time right at the start of the school year.

Our local charter schools didn't have similar struggles because of their more modern facilities and their beneficial treatment under Pennsylvania's unfair funding system.

To provide a clearer picture of Allentown School District's challenges, let me briefly share the stories of two of our schools:

First, Jefferson Elementary School, built in 1910 with an addition in 1924, is 113 years old. Capital improvements over the next decade are projected to exceed \$20 million, while a complete school renovation is estimated at \$33.64 million. To construct a new 700-student elementary school as a replacement for Jefferson, the cost is estimated at \$46 million.

Secondly, Harrison Morton Middle School holds a rich history dating back to 1874 when two separate schools merged. Its aging infrastructure fails to support modern educational models, safety measures, and technological advancements. Over the next 10 years, we anticipate needing approximately \$30 million for capital improvements, with a complete renovation costing more than \$42 million and reducing capacity by over 120 students.

These numbers come from our District-wide feasibility study update from 2021 - now imagine how much these projections have gone up given the rising inflation rates and cost of construction.

To address these pressing issues, our district currently allocates \$4 million annually for maintenance and safety measures. However, this falls far short of the financial support required to address the identified deficiencies. It is clear that without significant funding, our students' educational experience will continue to be hindered by the limitations of our school buildings.

More equitable state funding – yet to be provided by state lawmakers following the Commonwealth Court's ruling – would allow the Allentown School District to allocate more

funding to infrastructure issues, while also providing a more equitable education for our students.

Equity lies at the heart of our mission, and is the core of my focus as superintendent of the Allentown School District. Ensuring that all students have access to safe, modern, and effective learning environments is an essential aspect of achieving that goal. The implications of these aging buildings extend beyond bricks and mortar; they influence our students' potential and shape their futures.

What happens when families don't feel that we can do that? They remove their children from our public schools and enroll them in charter schools. Let's take a competitive look at two of our oldest elementary schools and two of our newest.

Mosser Elementary School was built in 1917 and Ritter Elementary School was built in 1925. In the catchment area of Mosser Elementary School, 176 students opt to attend a charter school. In the Ritter neighborhood, it is 188.

Compare that to Ramos Elementary School, which opened in 2010, and Hayes Elementary School, which opened in 2021. Now, both of these schools have larger catchment areas than Mosser & Ritter, but Ramos only has 136 students who elect to attend a charter school, and at Hayes that number is down to 110.

At the middle school level, 319 students attend charter schools who should be going to Harrison Morton Middle School. That is 50 students more than any other middle school, and 100 students more than Trexler Middle School.

We implore you to consider the urgency of this matter and collaborate on solutions that will empower our students to thrive.

I truly believe that the Allentown School District can become one of the highest-performing public school districts in the state - but that cannot happen without equitable and adequate financial support.

I want to again thank our legislators for their dedication and tireless efforts, and for always advocating for Allentown.

Thank you.