

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

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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.