

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.