



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!