

**Written testimony of Laura Boyce, Teach Plus Pennsylvania Executive Director,  
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 Laura Boyce, and I'm the Executive Director of Teach Plus Pennsylvania. I started my career as a high school English and social studies teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, and was also an elementary and middle school principal in Camden, NJ prior to my current role. I'm also the parent of two sons who will attend public schools in Philadelphia in a few short years.

[Teach Plus](#) is a national education non-profit that empowers excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

### **Envisioning an Equitable Education System**

What does an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success look like? This month, Teach Plus teachers across the commonwealth have been holding focus groups with students and families to understand their aspirations for students' futures, how they define a successful and good life, what role they believe schools should play in helping students achieve their dreams, and how they think our education system is currently doing in fulfilling this role.

While the full report won't be available for several months – it will be completed around the same time as this commission's report – what we've heard so far is illuminating. **Overwhelmingly, whether they are from urban, suburban, or rural areas, from wealthy or underfunded districts, parents and students have big dreams for the future.** Students speak about pursuing passions, obtaining financial stability and generational wealth, and changing their communities. Parents dream of their children becoming independent, happy, psychologically strong, and fulfilled in their careers. The idea of realizing students' full potential is one that has been repeated in almost every group.

Last week, I had the opportunity to speak to one of my former students, whom I taught at an underfunded high school in North Philadelphia, who is now a father to two young boys. He told me about how inquisitive, perceptive, and caring his children are. He described his dreams for his kids: "I just want them to be happy doing whatever they want, whether that's being a teacher or being a doctor or being a police officer, whatever it is, as long as they're able to maximize their full potential. And whatever they love doing, I don't want them to just do something as a job... I want them to be able to do what they're passionate about and be successful at that. I want them to be looked at from society as respectable, helpful, caring to others, having empathy for others." I was struck by his responses, not only because I was proud of the great father he's become, but because his aspirations for his children are so similar to the ones I have for my own two sons of about the same age.

**Communities' dreams for their children's futures are sky-high all across Pennsylvania, and there is also commonality in communities' expectations that public schools will be the vehicles that allow children to achieve these dreams.** When they speak about their expectations for schools, parents and students talk about the need for access and exposure to new subjects and experiences, their desire for caring and skilled educators, and the importance of creating relationships and a sense of belonging and community to ensure all students can learn. Overwhelmingly, they view it as "very important" that schools teach students all of the following:

- Core subjects like reading, writing, math, and science (academic skills)
- Skills for future jobs and careers (vocational skills)

- Skills to succeed in college / higher education (post-secondary skills)
- How to think for themselves (critical thinking skills)
- How to interact with others (social skills)
- How to help their communities and make the world a better place (character/citizenship skills)
- How to manage their emotions and mental health (social-emotional skills)

**Across geography, race, and class, there are more commonalities than differences in what parents and students want from their public schools. But we know that while brilliance, talent, and potential are equally distributed across the commonwealth, educational resources are not.** When I asked my former student what could be better with public schools in Pennsylvania, without prompting, he named “funding” as the top thing that needs to change, saying, “It’s creating an unequal balance for kids.”

### **A System Defined by Inequity**

Today, I want to emphasize the direct causal link from inequitable funding (resources) to inequitable educational opportunities (inputs) to inequitable educational outcomes. **Whether we focus on resources, inputs, or outcomes, Pennsylvania consistently is rated one of the most inequitable states in the country.**

To illustrate this point, I like to make an analogy to a baking competition – the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off – where contestants must bake the best cake. Contestant A is given cookbooks, state-of-the-art equipment, and a fully stocked pantry. Contestant B receives one grocery bag of expired ingredients, no recipes, and an Easy-Bake Oven. When A’s beautiful cake wins, some commentators blame Contestant B for not trying hard enough or not using her resources wisely, and question whether she really even deserved cake in the first place.

We can intuitively recognize the unfairness of such a system, but it’s nearly identical to our current approach to funding public schools in Pennsylvania. And the out-of-touch critiques of the commentators in this fictional bake-off aren’t that different from those made by lawyers defending the inequitable status quo in the school funding lawsuit, who [explained differences in outcomes between high-wealth and low-wealth districts](#) by saying that “some students are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities offered or perhaps are more industrious” and [questioned](#), “What use would someone on the McDonald’s career track have for Algebra 1?...There’s a need for retail workers, for people who know how to flip a pizza crust.”

As a former educator who taught in the underfunded Philadelphia public schools, I’ve taught — and loved — the students dismissed by lawmakers as less “industrious” and destined for the “McDonald’s track.” I’ve seen their curiosity, brilliance, ambition, and work ethic: Verónica, who dreamed of becoming a scientist and inventing new vaccines and miracle drugs; Bryan, who worked multiple jobs and still completed every homework assignment; Josh and Cashey, who started their own lunchtime book club to nerd out about their favorite pleasure reads. I’ve also seen the obstacles placed in their way, both by external factors like poverty and gun violence as well as the school system itself, which provides them fewer resources and opportunities than their peers in wealthier suburbs.

### **Inequitable Resources and Opportunities**

**We start off with inequitable resources:** school districts in the wealthiest quintile spend \$6,200 more per pupil than the poorest school districts after adjusting for student need, according to Dr. Matt Kelly’s updated [analysis](#). Pennsylvania [ranks 42nd nationally in state share of overall education funding](#), and also [ranks 45th in terms of funding equity](#) according to the Education Law Center’s *Making the Grade* report.

These inequitable resources inevitably lead to inequitable educational opportunities, or inputs. **These inputs are measurable, and they consistently reveal that Pennsylvania has some of the greatest inequities in the country.** As my colleague David Lapp will highlight in greater detail in his testimony, when analyzing educational opportunity data from the federal Office of Civil Rights, [Research for Action found](#) that “Pennsylvania’s gaps in access to educational opportunity rank among the five worst nationwide in terms of both race and poverty.” These gaps were found across three indices: access to quality educators, access to

advanced coursework, and access to positive school climate. The researchers found that “this poor ranking is reflected across all three indices, with at least one race or income gap ranking 46th or worse, among the five least equitable states.”

Among the many inequities in access to educational opportunity caused by our inequitable funding system, I’d like to zoom in on the intersection of underfunding and educator staffing. Teach Plus has been actively involved in efforts to address teacher shortages and expand and diversify the educator workforce in Pennsylvania over the past several years, including co-leading the [#PANeedsTeachers coalition](#) and leading the policy and advocacy efforts of the [Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium](#). Through our research and advocacy efforts, it’s become clear that **while educator shortages are a national trend, Pennsylvania’s teacher shortage crisis cannot be separated from its school funding inadequacy and inequity crisis**. While all districts in Pennsylvania are increasingly feeling the effects of a nationwide decline in interest in teaching and a diminishing educator pipeline, it’s underfunded districts that are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Without adequate resources, underfunded districts can’t keep up with wealthier districts in recruitment and retention of qualified educators in an increasingly constrained labor market. Specifically, research has revealed that the lowest-wealth and most inadequately funded districts in Pennsylvania:

- **Employ less-qualified teachers than adequately funded districts.** The most underfunded districts employ the highest percentages of novice teachers, out-of-field teachers, and emergency certified teachers. For example, compared to adequately funded districts, middle school students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of at least \$3,467 are nearly twice as likely to be taught by a novice teacher (three or fewer years of experience), 40% more likely to be taught by an out-of-field teacher, and nearly nine times more likely to be taught by an emergency certified teacher (see Figures 1-3 in Appendix).
- **Have higher rates of teacher attrition than high-wealth districts.** The teacher attrition rate for the lowest-wealth quintile of districts is nearly 50% higher than that of the wealthiest quintile (see Figure 4 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer classroom teachers per student than adequately funded districts.** In adequately funded districts, the average number of teachers per 1,000 students is 76.1, compared to an average of 64.8 students in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 5 in Appendix).
- **Have lower average teacher salaries than high-wealth districts.** The average teacher salary in adequately funded districts is \$83,400, 24% higher than the average teacher salary of \$67,021 in districts with a “very high” per-student shortfall of \$3,467 or higher (see Figure 6 in Appendix).
- **Have fewer support staff per student than adequately funded districts.** Adequately funded districts have more support staff per 1,000 students, on average, compared to inadequately funded districts. In particular, districts with “very high” per-student shortfalls have 23% fewer guidance counselors, 57% fewer librarians, and 8% fewer psychologists and social workers (see Figure 7 in Appendix).

To be sure, targeted investments in the teacher workforce are needed to reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, make the profession more attractive, improve teacher working conditions and opportunities for career advancement, and better retain teachers, as Teach Plus has advocated for and will continue to advocate for. But this data makes clear that the teacher shortage will not be solved until Pennsylvania’s school funding adequacy and equity problems are also addressed, because underfunded districts will never be able to compete with wealthier districts for the most qualified teachers until they are receiving adequate and equitable funding. **Since [teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement](#), it is critical to address funding inequities that contribute to staffing inequities if we hope to see student achievement in our most underfunded and underperforming schools improve.**

### **Inequitable Student Outcomes**

Having established that Pennsylvania is among the most inequitable states in the country when it comes to both resources and inputs, we now turn to educational outcomes. **It should come as no surprise that Pennsylvania**

**has some of the nation's widest racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.** According to [an analysis by Dr. Ed Fuller](#) of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card, Pennsylvania had the largest socioeconomic achievement gaps in the country in 4th grade math, the third-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. In 4th grade reading, Pennsylvania had the fifth-largest socioeconomic achievement gap, the fourth-largest Black-white achievement gap, and the second-largest Hispanic-white achievement gap. Additional analysis presented in the school funding trial made clear that these achievement gaps cannot be explained away by poverty or other out-of-school factors; low-income students do better academically in well-funded schools than they do in underfunded schools.

**Again, you can draw a straight line from inequitable resources to inequitable learning opportunities to inequitable achievement outcomes.** This aligns with everything the research tells us about how money matters in education, and how specific educational inputs, from access to pre-kindergarten to safe facilities, are directly correlated with student learning. **Given this research, it is unfair and cynical to decry the underachievement of students in underfunded districts while simultaneously refusing to give these districts the resources they need to hire sufficient numbers of qualified and well-prepared educators, update their facilities, expand access to pre-kindergarten, and provide equal educational opportunities to those provided in wealthier districts.** Like the Great Pennsylvania Bake-Off, in Pennsylvania, our school funding system gives students from poor districts dramatically inferior inputs, but students and educators are expected to achieve the same achievement outcomes as their wealthy peers – and blamed for the system's failure when they do not.

### **The Historical Link Between School Funding and Student Achievement**

If we look at Pennsylvania's performance on the Nation's Report Card over the past 25 years, we see that there was one period of dramatically improving student achievement across all grade levels and subjects. Between 2002 and 2011/13,<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania NAEP scores increased significantly in every category, with particularly large gains for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (see Figure 8 in Appendix).

What accounted for this progress in the beginning of the 21st century? While many factors likely played a role, one critical factor was undoubtedly **Governor Ed Rendell's prioritization of increasing state funding for education as a top goal for his administration** – a goal he saw as inextricably linked to another of his top priorities, economic development. **During Rendell's two terms, Pennsylvania steadily increased both the amount and the state share of basic education funding, with three years of increases over 5.5%.** Importantly, while increases in state education funding benefited all school districts in Pennsylvania, funding increases were targeted and accelerated toward high-need districts in several ways that could help to specifically explain the closing of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps during this time. The use of adequacy targets ensured that the lowest-spending districts were receiving the most additional dollars from the state, and accountability block grants provided additional weighted funding for high-need students. Districts were also supported to invest new dollars into evidence-based interventions such as pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and tutoring, and were given support in understanding and responding to their achievement data in this new era of accountability. In addition to accountability, the state gave districts support to ensure they were making data-driven and research-supported decisions to improve instruction. According to [an analysis by Rendell's office](#), **“the districts in the state that received the biggest dollar increases showed the greatest reduction in students scoring ‘below basic’ on state tests, especially in math.”**

Unfortunately, starting in 2011/13, the achievement gains of the prior decade were reversed, and racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps widened again. This nosedive in achievement immediately followed the devastating cuts of nearly \$1 billion in state education funding in a single year under Governor Tom Corbett. These cuts triggered mass layoffs across the commonwealth and disproportionately impacted low-wealth districts, which were less able to make up for the state shortfall with local revenue. Many districts never fully recovered from the Corbett-era cuts in terms of staffing, and by the time overall state funding rebounded under

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<sup>1</sup> In some categories, scores peaked in 2011, while others peaked in 2013.



Governor Tom Wolf, a growing teacher shortage was impairing the ability of all districts, and particularly low-wealth ones, to attract highly-qualified educators with the funding they received.

### **Goals for the Basic Education Funding Commission**

The past provides us with a roadmap for the future. **If we want to see improved student achievement, economic growth, and a strong workforce in Pennsylvania, investing in adequate and equitable educational opportunities for all Pennsylvanian's students is the best investment we as taxpayers can make.** The PA Schools Work coalition, of which Teach Plus is a member, has proposed [four criteria for success](#) that can function as a “report card” for this commission’s critical work of reforming our school funding system to pass constitutional muster:

**First, the commission must set adequacy targets for all 500 districts.** We won’t be able to assess our progress toward reaching the constitutional standard without first setting clear and evidence-based benchmarks for the cost of providing a “comprehensive, effective, contemporary education” for every child regardless of where they live. Adequacy targets set goals for funding levels for each district based on the spending levels of high-performing districts, adjusted based on measures of each district’s student needs. We won’t know how far we need to go or when we’ve reached adequacy without these targets. Dr. Kelly’s recently updated analysis, based on the General Assembly’s own methodology and updated to include critical factors including special education and mandated costs, should serve as a starting point.

**Second, the commission must include resources for pre-K, special education, facilities, and transportation in its plan.** Judge Jubelirer made clear in her ruling that low-wealth districts are shortchanged in all of these areas, and that they are each important factors in an adequate and equitable education. Therefore, although its original legislative mandate was limited to making adjustments to the basic education funding formula, the commission must go beyond basic education funding as it has been historically defined and incorporate these factors in order to fully address the lawsuit. The commission should estimate the costs of expanding pre-K, fully funding special education, ensuring facilities are safe and modern, and providing transportation, and include these costs in the overall funding targets it sets.

**Third, the commission must set targets for the “state share” of overall funding targets.** Pennsylvania’s state share of overall education funding is one of the lowest in the country, and many of the inequities in the current system are driven by the inability of low-wealth districts to raise enough revenue locally to adequately fund schools without unreasonably burdening taxpayers. The state must determine a fair share of overall education funding it will provide to close districts’ adequacy gaps, keeping in mind each district’s ability to raise local funding, and commit to funding the state share.

**Finally, the commission must create a plan, with a reasonable timeline, for the state to close its share of the adequacy gap.** This plan should start with the 2024-25 state budget and require no more than 3-5 years to reach full implementation and pass constitutional muster. It should also include increases in state funding to keep pace with inflation in future years.

**If this commission fails to meet any of the above criteria, it will have failed to meet its constitutional duty, and it will be the public school students of Pennsylvania who will suffer the consequences.** This will not be an easy task. However, I have had the opportunity to meet most of you on the commission individually over the past several years, and I believe in your commitment to Pennsylvania’s students. I believe you ran for public office not to do what’s easy or popular, but to do what’s right, and to make our commonwealth stronger.

### **A Call to Action**

Since we’re in Lancaster today, I’d like to reflect on the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens, one of my personal heroes, from whom my older son got his middle name. In addition to fighting fiercely at the federal level against slavery and for passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, Stevens was a fierce advocate for public education. He saw public education as essential to a functioning democracy, a tool for fighting poverty

and creating economic mobility, and inextricably tied to the fights for racial equality and justice. As a legislator in the Pennsylvania General Assembly prior to his election to Congress, he was most proud of his efforts to institute a statewide, free public education system and his successful defense of the new system when critics tried to repeal it. As with his stances on racial equality, **his support for public education was seen as radical in his day, but he is now recognized as ahead of his time – on the right side of history.** In his 1835 speech that is credited with stopping the repeal of our new public education system, he said to his fellow legislators:

*“It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the nineteenth century, of entering into a formal argument, to prove the utility, and, to free governments, **the absolute necessity of education**...If, then, education be of admitted importance to the people, under all forms of government, and of unquestioned necessity, when they govern themselves, it follows, of course, that its cultivation and diffusion is **a matter of public concern, and a duty which every government owes to its people**...”*

*“Pennsylvania's sons possess as high native talents as any other nation of ancient or modern time. **Many of the poorest of her children possess as bright intellectual gems if they were as highly polished as did the scholars of Greece or Rome. But too long, too disgracefully long, has coward, trembling, procrastinating legislation permitted them to lie buried in dark, unfathomable caves.** If you wish to acquire popularity, how often have you been admonished to build not your monuments of brass or marble but make them of ever-living mind...*

*“All these things would be easily admitted by almost every man, **were it not for the supposed cost.** I have endeavored to show that it is not expensive; but, admit that it were somewhat so, **why do you cling so closely to your gold?... Who would not rather do one living deed than to have his ashes forever enshrined in ever-burnished gold?**”*

*“...I trust that when we come to act on this question we shall all take lofty ground - look beyond the narrow space which now circumscribes our visions - beyond the passing, fleeting point of time on which we stand; and **so cast our votes that the blessing of education shall be conferred on every son of Pennsylvania** - shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freemen, and lay on earth a broad and a solid foundation for that enduring knowledge which goes on increasing through increasing eternity.”*

While the century is different, the responsibility this commission faces is just as great, and many of the pressures on you are the same as those facing the General Assembly nearly 200 years ago. In many ways, the future of public education is in your hands, just as it was in theirs.

As in the 1830s, some have balked at the costs of fixing our inadequate and inequitable system, questioning when enough will be enough, and why student achievement hasn't improved in the past few years despite recent increases in education funding. But an inadequate and inequitable system, created over decades, cannot be fixed overnight. **Even with recent increases, many underfunded districts, including those that have hosted the first four hearings, are still grossly underfunded** – Allentown by almost \$10,000 per student, Harrisburg by over \$10,000, Philadelphia by nearly \$8,000, and Lancaster by \$4,600. While recent steps in the right direction have narrowed adequacy gaps, these steps have been insufficient, and it was just this year that the Commonwealth Court found our funding system unconstitutional and discriminatory – a ruling that was not appealed and now stands as this commission's charge and call to action. And the costs of failing to adequately educate our commonwealth's students – those gems in need of polishing – are even greater.

**This commission did not create our inadequate and inequitable system, but you have inherited it, and now have a choice whether to perpetuate it or reform it.** The time for action is long overdue, as “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” It is long past time to fix our unconstitutional state system for funding public education, and the eyes of the children of Pennsylvania are on this commission, waiting for justice.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your commitment to Pennsylvania's children.

## APPENDIX

Figure 1: Elementary School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy<sup>2</sup>

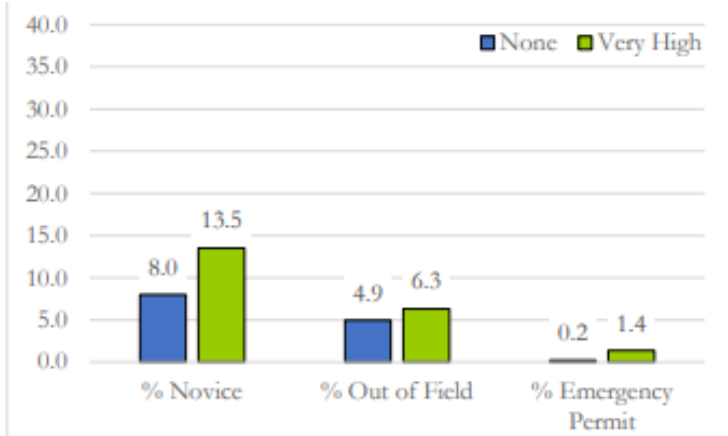


Figure 2: Middle School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy<sup>3</sup>

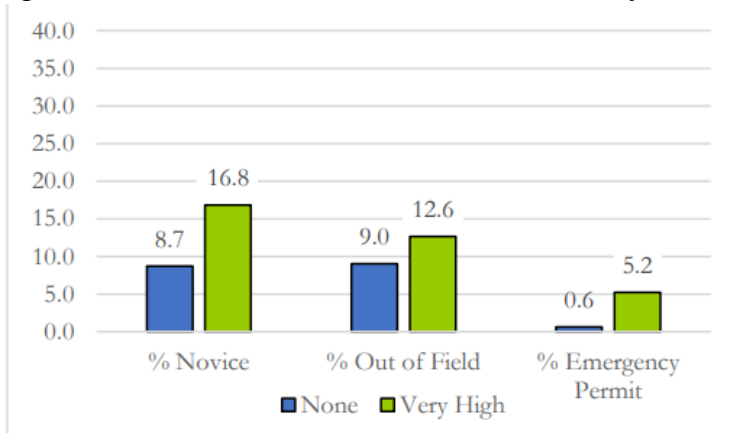
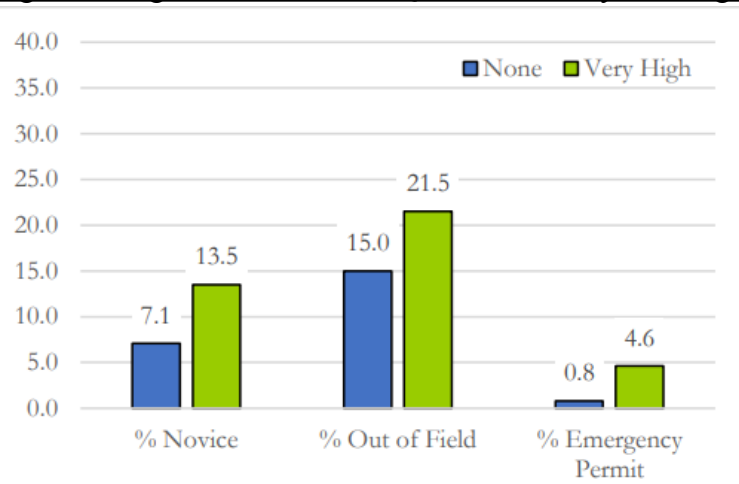


Figure 3: High School Teacher Qualifications by Funding Adequacy<sup>4</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Analysis by Ed Fuller, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [The Inequitable Distribution of Teacher Quality in Pennsylvania](#).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Figure 4: Teacher Attrition by District Wealth (2022 to 2023)<sup>5</sup>

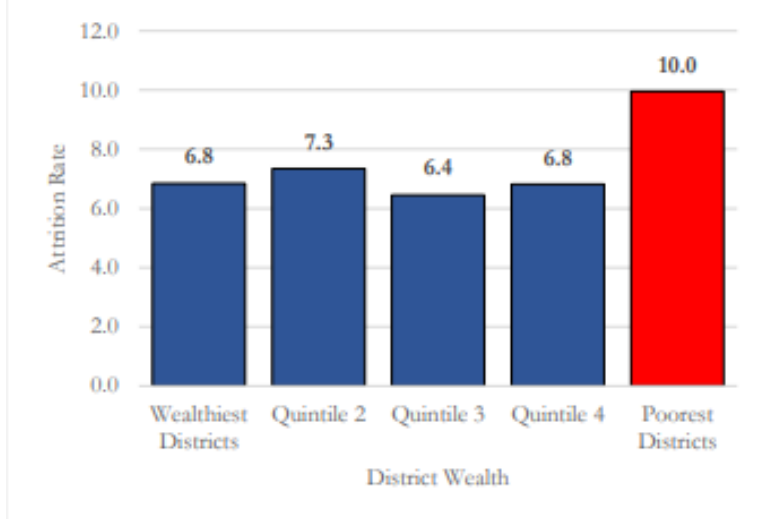


Figure 5: Teachers Per 1,000 Students in Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20<sup>6</sup>

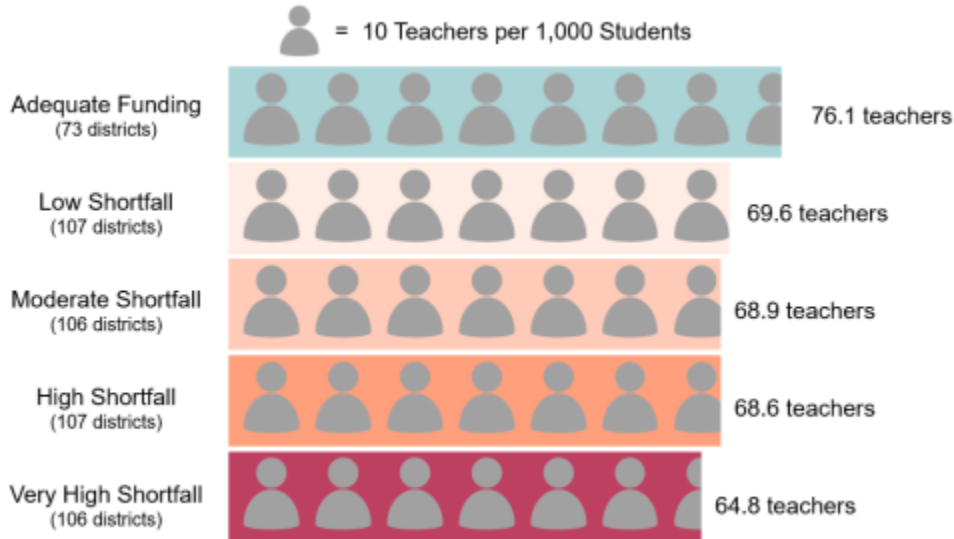
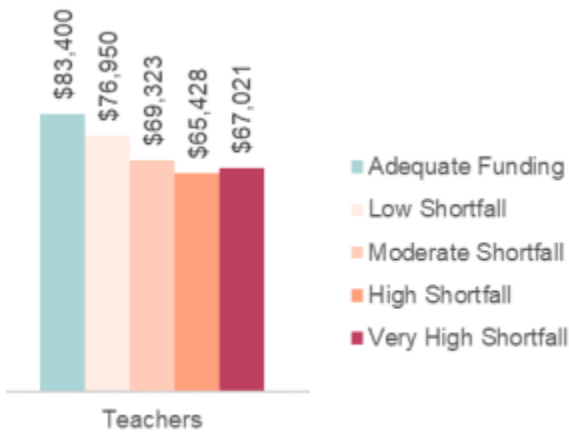


Figure 6: Average Teacher Salaries by District Funding Adequacy Per Pupil, 2019-20<sup>7</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Analysis by Ed Fuller, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [Exacerbating the Shortage of Teachers: Rising Teacher Attrition in Pennsylvania from 2014 to 2023](#).

<sup>6</sup> Analysis by David Lapp and Anna Shaw-Amoah, data from Pennsylvania Department of Education. [Pennsylvania School Funding and School Staffing Disparities](#).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

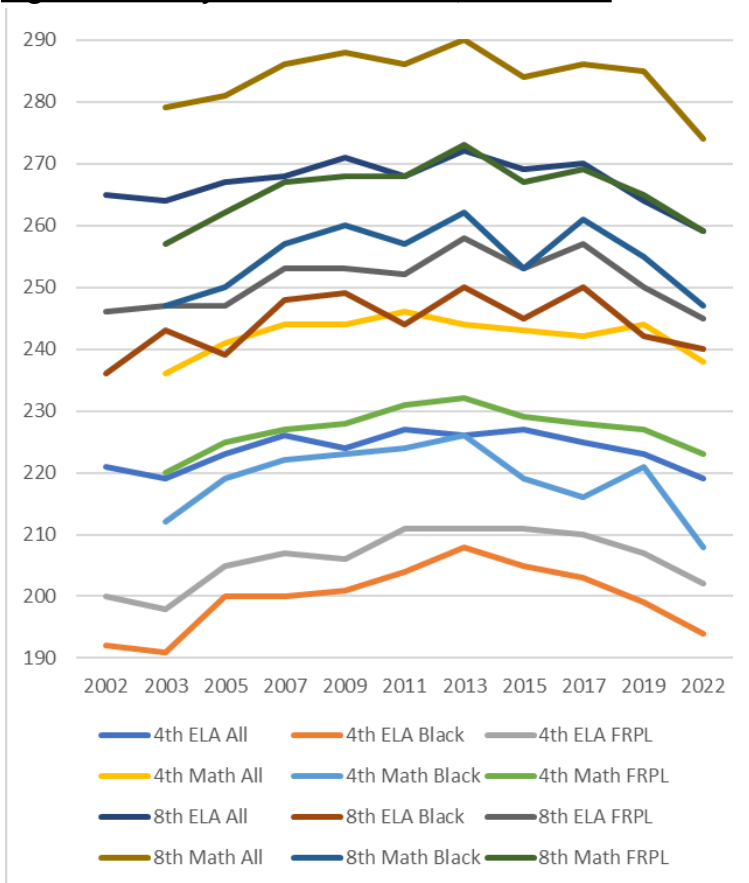


Figure 7: Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students in Districts by Funding Adequacy Category, 2019-20<sup>8</sup>

Type of Professional Support Staff	Number of Professional Support Staff per 1,000 Students With Percent Difference from Level in Adequate Funding Districts				
	Adequate Funding (73 districts)	Low Shortfall (107 districts)	Moderate Shortfall (106 districts)	High Shortfall (107 districts)	Very High Shortfall (106 districts)
All Professional Support Staff	9.9	8.6 -13%	8.1 -18%	7.5 -24%	9.7 -2%
Guidance Counselors	3.1	2.8 -10%	2.7 -13%	2.6 -16%	2.4 -23%
Library Sciences	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.1 -21%	1.0 -29%	0.6 -57%
School Nurses	1.4	1.1 -21%	1.2 -14%	1.1 -21%	1.4 0%
Psychologists, Social Workers, Home/ School Visitors	1.2	1.1 -8%	1.0 -17%	0.9 -25%	1.1 -8%
Support Supervisors, Coordinators, Specialists	0.9	0.8 -11%	0.7 -22%	0.7 -22%	0.4 -56%
Physical/Occupational Therapists, Dental Hygienists	0.1	0.1 0%	0.1 0%	0.1 0%	0.1 0%
Unspecified Professional Student Support Staff	1.8	1.6 -11%	1.4 -22%	1.1 -39%	3.7 +106%

Note: Numbers may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Figure 8: Pennsylvania NAEP Data, 2002-2022<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Analysis by Laura Boyce, data from the National Center for Education Statistics.