

Basic Education Funding Commission

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Unlocking Potential: The Crucial Role of Adequate Education Funding in Pennsylvania and Its Impact on the School District of Lancaster

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Good morning commission members, fellow colleagues, and guests joining us here today in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My name is Matt Przywara, and I am the assistant superintendent at the School District of Lancaster. Among my responsibilities is the oversight of finance and operations, as I was previously the CFO in the district for 16 years and I am before you again, nine years later to continue our discussion on a matter of paramount importance - the significance of adequate education funding, particularly through the lens of basic education and what it means not only for the School District of Lancaster, but for all students in the Commonwealth.

Education is the cornerstone of a thriving society. It's the key that unlocks the doors to opportunity, drives innovation, and fuels social progress. In the 21st century, the value of a quality education cannot be overstated. Yet, the path to providing this quality education is paved with challenges, especially in districts such as the School District of Lancaster.

The concept of basic education funding is not just about dollars and cents; it's about investing in our most precious resource - our children. Adequate funding is the lifeblood of an effective educational system. It enables schools to attract and retain talented educators, maintain up-to-date facilities, and provide students with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly complex world. For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, this funding is not an expense; it's an investment in the future.

Today I want to illustrate our annual struggle with a structural deficit caused by expenses that rise faster than our tax base can keep pace, causing disproportionately high real estate tax rates which is exacerbated by the inadequate funding from the state.

Our expenses continue to rise in the form of human capital resources. We are a service-driven organization that relies on the many talents of our educators and support staff in our schools. Our students are in need of far greater services than that of our neighboring peers and that is why we need to invest more each year into our people and programs at the local level. We are a transparent and values-driven organization that is very mindful of any additional tax burden we place on our local community. We are outpaced on the amenities our close peers have such as state-of-the-art facilities, instructional resources, and athletic fields all of which are critical to an educational experience our students should expect to be prepared to compete for college and career opportunities.

Our local tax revenue is largely static. Our district is landlocked, with a dwindling amount of space to add new development that would grow our tax base. At the same time, more than a quarter of a billion dollars in property value in our district—30 percent of all properties—are tax-exempt, including hospitals, colleges, churches, and economic development projects. Though we receive voluntary payments from some of these owners, it is tens of millions of dollars less than their full property-tax bills would be.

The impact of all of this is a disproportionately high millage rate for our homeowners that raises far less revenue than lower rates in more affluent districts.

For example, in 2021-22 the New Hope-Solebury School District, on the New Jersey border near Doylestown with just over 1,300 students, has a local tax rate that generates more than \$30,141

in local revenue per student. When you add in the district's BEF per student of \$990 per student they generate more than \$31,000 in combined state and local revenue per student.

By comparison, in the School District of Lancaster, our tax rate only generates \$9,611 per student from our local revenue. With the additional state funding (including Level Up) of \$6,500 per student, we are only able to generate a combined total of \$16,000 per student. The disparities in this example are one of many when comparing the funding for schools in the Commonwealth.

As my colleague Dr. Miles noted earlier, nearly 90% of our students are economically disadvantaged, and one in five students, or nearly 2,000, speak a language other than English.

In New Hope School District, 10% of students are economically disadvantaged. Approximately 25 kids speak a language other than English.

Only through predictable, consistent, and adequate funding mechanisms like Basic Education Funding can we provide our students with the resources they need to access the education they deserve.

Adequate education funding in Lancaster means smaller class sizes, which allows for more individualized attention and better learning outcomes. It means well-equipped classrooms with the latest technology and resources, so students can prepare for a future where technology is integral. It means extracurricular programs that nurture talents and interests outside the classroom, creating well-rounded individuals ready to tackle the challenges of tomorrow. And it means state-of-the-art facilities where students, staff, and community can come together to be their very best, while not having to combat factors such as unregulated temperatures in classrooms, failing electrical systems, and teaching our students with the most learning needs in closets, hallways, detached trailers and the like.

However, the impact of adequate funding goes beyond the immediate benefits. It's an investment in the entire community. A well-educated workforce attracts businesses, stimulates economic growth, and ultimately strengthens the fabric of society. It reduces crime rates and reliance on social services, leading to a more prosperous and stable community for everyone.

The struggle for adequate funding in education is ongoing, and it requires the collective effort of citizens, policymakers, and educators. It's about making education a priority, not just in words but in actions and budget allocations. As we start each and every budget presentation in the School District of Lancaster, our budget is an expression of our values. It is time for the Commonwealth to express its collective values and invest in education by making a meaningful and concerted effort to move this process forward. It's about recognizing that the future of our state and our nation depends on the quality of education we provide today.

In closing, let us remember that adequate education funding through basic education is not a luxury; it's a necessity. It's a commitment to the future, a commitment to equality of opportunity, and a commitment to the well-being of our communities. By investing in education, we are investing in a brighter, more equitable future for Pennsylvania and the School District of Lancaster.

Thank you.