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Testimony to the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission
School District of Philadelphia
September 14, 2023

On behalf of the Board of Education, I would like to thank the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission; Representative Mike Sturla, Commission Co-Chair; Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill, Commission Co-Chair; Commission Members; and the Pennsylvania Legislature at-large and Administration for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Basic Education Funding Commission on the vitally important topic of adequate and equitable school funding.

Critical to providing students with opportunities for success is adequate and equitable funding for every school district in the Commonwealth. However, the current system of funding education in Pennsylvania shortchanges low-wealth districts like Philadelphia, which includes both district and charter schools. It has been well documented that public education in Philadelphia has been grossly underfunded. And this disinvestment in public education has had a negative impact on both the district and charter schools in Philadelphia. According to PA Schools Work, adequate state funding for Philadelphia would translate to an additional \$5,584 per student.

Earlier this year, Commonwealth Court Judge Cohn Jubelirer ruled that the current system of funding schools in Pennsylvania is unconstitutional because it results in wide disparities in spending between low-wealth and high-wealth districts. The Judge also said that the inequities required not only a redistribution of state aid but also more funding overall.

As a practicing attorney, I have had the opportunity to review the opinion, and it is clear that under the current funding formula, we have public education systems that feel separate and unequal. So we look forward to the Governor and the Legislature acting to provide a fair, adequate and predictable funding system that enables all children to meet state academic standards and does not discriminate against low-wealth districts.

At every Board of Education meeting, we hear pressing and important concerns from the public – about the need to invest in our buildings, about the need for additional staff, and the need for smaller class sizes. We share these priorities, but the current system of funding education in Pennsylvania leaves school districts like Philadelphia with the continual challenge of deciding



how to invest limited resources to meet the varying needs of our students and staff. According to an analysis by the Public Interest Law Center and the Education Law Center, the School District would need an additional \$1.14 billion annually to meet the educational needs of our students.

Additionally, the School District of Philadelphia is the only school district in the Commonwealth that cannot raise its own taxes, so the District is completely dependent on our local and state elected officials to provide the resources necessary to ensure that every student in the city has access to a quality public education that prepares them for future success. It is the School Board's responsibility to manage the financial health and sustainability of the system of public education in Philadelphia, and we are responsible for the sound allocation of limited financial resources.

Although the School District is not adequately funded, we have been good stewards of public funds and have made substantial financial progress since 2017 when the District exited the state's financial distress program. In 2018, Moody's upgraded our bond rating to investment grade for the first time since 1977. We have also had a positive fund balance for the past several years and have invested in our students by filling over 2,500 positions, adding academic programs, strengthening behavioral supports for our most at-risk students and reestablishing student activities. We also have invested in our buildings by modernizing classrooms, upgrading training equipment, making repairs and remediating environmental hazards.

That said, if the School District were fully funded, we could invest in our priority areas of: upgrading school facilities, addressing gun violence and providing incentives to help fully staff our schools. The average age of our school buildings is 73 years old; and according to a 2017 analysis of School District facilities, the district's deferred maintenance costs total \$4.5 billion. At least 85 buildings should be considered for renovation and 21 buildings should be considered for closure.

Another priority is the urgent need to decrease levels of gun violence in the city to keep our learners safe, especially as they go to and from school. While the School District has put in place measures to address safe passage to and from school, adequate state funding would enable us to invest in more programs to keep students safe when they are not in school. Such measures could include increasing safe corridors around schools and ensuring young people have safe places to go, such as libraries and rec centers, when schools are closed. Finally, because the School District is at a competitive disadvantage to recruit and retain staff compared to better-funded districts, we must invest more in recruitment and retention efforts so that our schools are fully staffed with highly qualified educators.



In addition to adequate and equitable funding, school districts must have plans that focus on student achievement, so they invest in the resources and facilities that students need to thrive. In May, the Board of Education adopted a Strategic Plan, “Accelerate Philly,” that aims to provide every learner in our School District with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes.

The Board believes that a quality education would give our learners the tools necessary to achieve self-determination, dignity, and their full potential. We believe this can be done with a laser focus on a student-centered approach to education, predicated on values such as equity, accountability, safety and respect. Goals and Guardrails, our plan to increase student achievement, has become our North Star for all decision making. It provides a framework for Board governance that focuses on racial equity, setting clear expectations for what students must know and be able to do, and rigorously monitoring progress towards achievement.

By establishing Goals and Guardrails and adopting a Strategic Plan, we have been able to align our priorities, policies and budgets so that students have the environment and resources they need to learn, thrive and succeed and eventually lead in a global society.

Over the past few years, the School District has been able to make strategic investments through the additional federal funds we received to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The District received \$1.1 billion in ARPA Federal Funding and used the funds to:

- Safely reopen schools and sustain in-person learning;
- Address students’ social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs resulting from the pandemic; and
- Maintain operations and delivery of services.

The District has been transparent about how we have spent federal funds and the investments we have made to improve student learning. Moving forward, we hope to see that school districts across the Commonwealth receive the additional funding and a redistribution of state aid, called for by Judge Cohn Jubelirer.

For years, our Board of Education has joined other school districts, families, elected officials and advocates to urge the legislature to provide a fair, adequate and predictable funding system that enables all children to meet state academic standards and reach their fullest potential. We look forward to a remedy that ensures our students, in both district and charter schools, will finally have the same opportunities as their peers in higher-resourced school districts.



We must all come together and act as a collective village for all the children in the Commonwealth to ensure that each learner has access to a quality education that empowers them to learn, achieve and reach their greatest potential in life. We appreciate your support of public education in Pennsylvania and look forward to working together in the best interest of all our learners.