

Ladies and gentlemen of the PA Basic Education Funding Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this crucial issue today. My name is David A. Burkett, and I am the Superintendent of the Everett Area School District located in Bedford County. Since 2015, I have served on the Executive Board of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural & Small Schools (PARSS). This past April, I was appointed as the PARSS Secretary. I stand before you to emphasize the pressing need for fair and equitable funding for public education in Pennsylvania. Our state's future depends on the quality of education we provide to our children. It is our fiduciary duty to ensure that every student has equal access to the opportunities that education affords.

Since I am a history educator, I would like to share a very brief history of PARSS. Since 1983, it has remained the mission of PARSS to advocate and *"promote equal opportunity for quality education for all students in every school and community in Pennsylvania."* In the early 1980's, a new funding formula was created called Equalized Subsidy for Basic Education (ESBE formula). Even then, the state did not fully fund the ESBE formula and only funded it at 80%. As tends to always be the case, this meant poor school districts lost funds proportionally to the wealthier school districts, due to low aid ratios. Because of this inequity, PARSS filed the first Equity Law Suit against PA Governor Robert Casey in 1991 on behalf of its collective membership of 214 school districts. In 1999, a decision was handed down on that first lawsuit by the Commonwealth Court of PA that stated equitable funding for school districts was a non-justiciable issue. Even so, PARSS continued to carry the torch for fair and equitable school funding. By November of 2014, PARSS, as the lone Educational Organization, with six school districts, seven parents and the NAACP, organized as plaintiffs and filed a second PA School Funding Lawsuit. After almost a decade of oral arguments, legal motions, briefs and continuances, a Landmark decision was handed down on February 7, 2023, by Honorable President Judge Renee Cohen Jubelirer stating that *"It is now the obligation of the Legislature, executive branch, and educators to make the constitutional promise [of a thorough and efficient education system] a reality in this commonwealth."*

For over forty years, the genuine focus of PARSS and fair public-school funding has been inseparable. Fair funding is what birthed the PARSS organization, and we are vested in the continual call for fair and equitable funding. Allocating the same base dollar amount per student to every school district regardless of their zip code, only exacerbates this recurring inequity. According to data by Penn State University's Dr. Matthew Kelly, 172 PARSS school districts are underfunded at least \$1,000 per student and 115 PARSS school districts have an inadequacy of at least \$3,000 per student. This is proof that just within the PARSS membership schools there is an inequity of the funding received. As an organization, PARSS is delivering a consistent message to the Legislature and advocating for the following:

1. Create serious adequacy targets for what schools need in order to provide students with a comprehensive, effective, and contemporary education. Regardless of student need or zip code, please provide them with resources to succeed in life, and meet these goals.
2. Develop a fair and equitable allocation of the "state share" to attain these targets, so each school district along with reasonable local tax efforts, can maintain adequate school funding. Representing low-wealth schools, PARSS knows all too well our districts cannot tax their way to sufficient funding. This is the state's responsibility.
3. There is an overdue need to address funding for Special Education, pre-Kindergarten programs and outdated facilities. Judge Jubelirer's opinion clearly stated the Constitution requires adequate funding for ALL aspects of public education; including early childhood education, special needs students and school facilities. All of these educational system funding components must be addressed.
4. Now is the time. We cannot wait another forty years. This is not a problem to be kicked down the road. There must be a sense of urgency to fix the problem of unfair and inequitable funding of public schools. We all need to work together to create a clear vision for the future of our children and rebuild the PA public education system. Without a vision, the people will perish.

As the Superintendent of a rural and small school district, we can specifically look at the Everett Area School District for examples of the disparities that currently exist in Pennsylvania's public education system. The Everett Area School District, like many others, faces significant challenges, due to inequitable funding. Despite our commitment to providing a quality education, the Everett Area School District grapples with limited resources, outdated textbooks, and inadequate infrastructure.

Understandably, these disparities are not unique to Everett Area School District and similar stories are echoed across our state. These disparities are manifested in various ways:

1. **Teacher Salaries:**

Rural districts often have difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified educators due to lower salary scales. This directly impacts the quality of instruction students receive.

**Example:** *Although our starting salary is at or near the recommended base salary of \$45,000; last month Everett hired a teacher, from another small rural school district, whose starting salary was at \$32,000. Additionally, because the current teacher applicant pool is so shallow; we, as a school district, have five teachers currently hired on emergency certificates.*

2. **Curriculum and Technology:**

Outdated textbooks and limited access to technology hinder the educational experience in many rural districts. Students should have access to the latest resources to compete in our technology-driven world.

**Example:** *For the 2023-24 school term, we purchased a new Math curriculum K-12. This was the first core curriculum purchase made at the district in over a decade. Purchasing new curriculum has been delayed over the years, due to reallocating our resources to other obligations.*

3. **Extracurricular Activities:**

Funding disparities can result in limited extracurricular activities, denying students opportunities for personal growth, leadership development, and community engagement.

**Example:** *While I was the Superintendent at Fannett-Metal School District, all junior high sports were eliminated, due to the severe funding cuts handed down under Governor Corbett in 2011. They had to be and still are, funded solely through a local booster organization.*

4. **Facility Maintenance:**

Aging infrastructure, in rural districts, requires costly repairs and upgrades. Neglecting these issues can endanger the safety and well-being of students and staff.

**Example:** *At Everett Area School District, our one elementary building was built in 1959 and the central elementary building was built in 1978. A lot of the HVAC equipment in these facilities is original to the building(s). Repairs to these buildings have been pushed off, due to reallocating our resources in other areas of need.*

5. **Special Education Services:**

Many rural districts struggle to provide adequate special education services, further disadvantaging students with unique learning needs.

**Example:** *Coupled with the high cost of Special Education is tuition paid to cyber charter schools for educating this population of students. We currently spend an average tuition rate of \$23,750 per special needs student in cyber charter schools.*

Now, let's consider the broader implications of these disparities. Inequitable funding not only hinders individual students potential but also affects our state's overall economic and social well-being. When we fail to provide equitable education, we perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit economic innovation or mobility.

My father always challenged me to never share or present concerns without bringing forth ideas or solutions to assist in correcting the problem. In doing so, I would like to offer and share the following ideas as potential

pathways to help us invest in public education and as an overall investment to Pennsylvania's future. Here are some steps we can take to address these issues:

1. **Fair Funding Formula**: Fully implement the fair funding formula to ensure that resources are distributed based on student need and district capacity.

*A cookie cutter approach is not fair and equitable; equity (fairness and just) vs. equality (same for all).*

2. **Teacher Recruitment and Retention**: Develop salary enhancements and professional opportunities to incentivize, attract, and retain qualified educators in rural districts.

*Everett currently has five emergency certified teachers that have been hired, within the last two years.*

3. **Technology and Curriculum Grants**: To level the playing field, allocate additional resources to rural districts for technology upgrades and curriculum development.

*What good is technology if our students are unable to use it at home, due to not being able to afford internet or absolutely no internet access.*

4. **Extracurricular Support**: Through grants, support extracurricular programs to enhance the overall educational experience for students.

*These extracurricular supports would be similar to after school or summer school learning opportunity grants.*

5. **Infrastructure Investment**: To ensure safe and conducive learning environments, establish a fund to address critical infrastructure needs in rural districts.

*Plan Con 2.0 should be established and facility funding made available for dilapidating buildings. Personally, I would advocate for a required local funding match by school districts to move this effort forward.*

6. **Special Education Support**: To ensure all students have access to the education they deserve, provide appropriate resources for comprehensive Special Education services.

*As was originally implemented with cyber-charter funding, I would advocate for full funding of any and all special needs students by the state.*

In conclusion, we cannot ignore the harsh realities faced by districts like Everett Area, nor can we overlook the invaluable contributions of rural education to our state's prosperity. It is our moral duty and it is economically imperative these funding disparities be rectified to provide every child in Pennsylvania an excellent and equitable education. We cannot let another generation of children pass by until we get this right.

The future of our society and this state depends upon it.

Thank you.