

Testimony to the Basic Education Funding Commission
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November 9, 2023

Good morning, Chair Sturla, Chair Phillips-Hill, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission. Thank you for allowing me to talk with you today about the importance of shared services as it relates to funding a comprehensive, effective, and contemporary system of public education in Pennsylvania. My name is Tom Butler, and I currently serve as the Executive Director of Appalachia Intermediate Unit 8. As the name implies, Appalachia Intermediate Unit 8 (IU8) serves four rural counties (Bedford, Blair, Somerset, and Cambria) and 35 school districts covering 3500 square miles. IU8 is the second-largest Intermediate Unit in Pennsylvania in terms of both geography, and the number of school districts served.

A situation rarely arises that allows policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to consider decisions as if we are living in the future. This is the opportunity the Commission has as we sit here in November of 2023. The decisions and recommendations you make now will affect the year 2036 when our current class of Kindergarten students graduate from our schools and enter the workforce, college, or other pursuits. Approaching the problem of giving all students a meaningful opportunity to succeed must be viewed through the lens of our kindergarten students when they graduate in 2036. What do they need to succeed? What do the schools need to help them succeed? Most importantly, what do our communities need to make possible the potential of all our Pennsylvania students?

Today's topic is the importance of shared services among school districts as you consider what school funding looks like in the year 2036. My experience, and the experience of the 35 school districts in IU8, is that sharing of resources is essential for providing high-quality

IU8 programs and services reached 32,343 students and 17,303 adults in the IU8 region.

Considering that the total student population in IU8 is approximately 46,000, the impact is significant. However, those numbers only tell a partial story, and the rest of the story is vital for the topic of shared services.

You can place all of the programs and services of an IU into three buckets:

1. Programs and services for which school districts pay the IU,
2. Programs and services that are at no cost to the districts because of State or Federal funds that "flow-through" the IU, and
3. Programs and services that are no cost to the district because of competitive grants the IU's have won.

In IU8, when you consider these three buckets, the numbers tell a story of high impact and capacity building. Of the 32,692 students who received programs and services through IU8, 24,343 received those programs and services at no cost to the school districts. In adult professional development, of the 17,303 adults who received some professional development from IU8, 11,309 individuals received the professional development at no cost to the school districts.

The role of Intermediate Units is to serve as an "intermediary" between PDE and the school districts. Each IU fulfills this role by building capacity among (and for) school districts. In other words, you are seeing the effect of the decision made in 1970 by the General Assembly to create a system of support to help build and maintain capacity within all of Pennsylvania school districts.

contemporary system of public education. These grassroots efforts reflect the different contexts in which each school district finds themselves. Sometimes, answers to complex problems come from think tanks, professional organizations, and policymakers. However, these "top-down" solutions must be coupled with "bottom-up" solutions that reflect local context.

Recommendations and Conclusions

It seems reasonable to assume that purposefully encouraging grassroots solutions to the education funding issue should be considered. Our school boards and school leaders are already working on solutions to these problems around shared services. I recommend the Commission consider three actions to encourage (and deepen) shared services:

1. Fund feasibility studies for school districts that are interested in integration.
2. Provide funding for school districts to upgrade facilities and other infrastructure that encourage shared services.
3. Allocate funds through the Intermediate Unit's "statement of work" system to leverage shared services and capacity building among school districts.