



TESTIMONY OF THE

PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

REGARDING

THE PANDEMIC IMPACT ON EDUCATION

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Good morning Chairs and members of the Senate Education and Health and Human Services Committees. Thank you for the opportunity for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to present written testimony regarding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education. My name is Art Levinowitz, and I am the PSBA President, and I have also served as a school director in the Upper Dublin School District for over 20 years.

Since the beginning of the pandemic school boards, administrators, teachers, and staff have been confronted with a set of unparalleled challenges in terms of planning and implementing educational programming which continues to provide robust and quality learning opportunities while protecting the health and safety of students and staff. This massive undertaking included responding to ever-changing health protocols; school building and vehicle cleaning; scheduling transportation and in-person classes to maintain social distancing; providing in-person, full virtual, and hybrid learning opportunities; modifying extracurricular offerings; acquiring remote learning devices, internet access, and other technologies for students and staff; purchasing personal protective equipment; and much, much more.

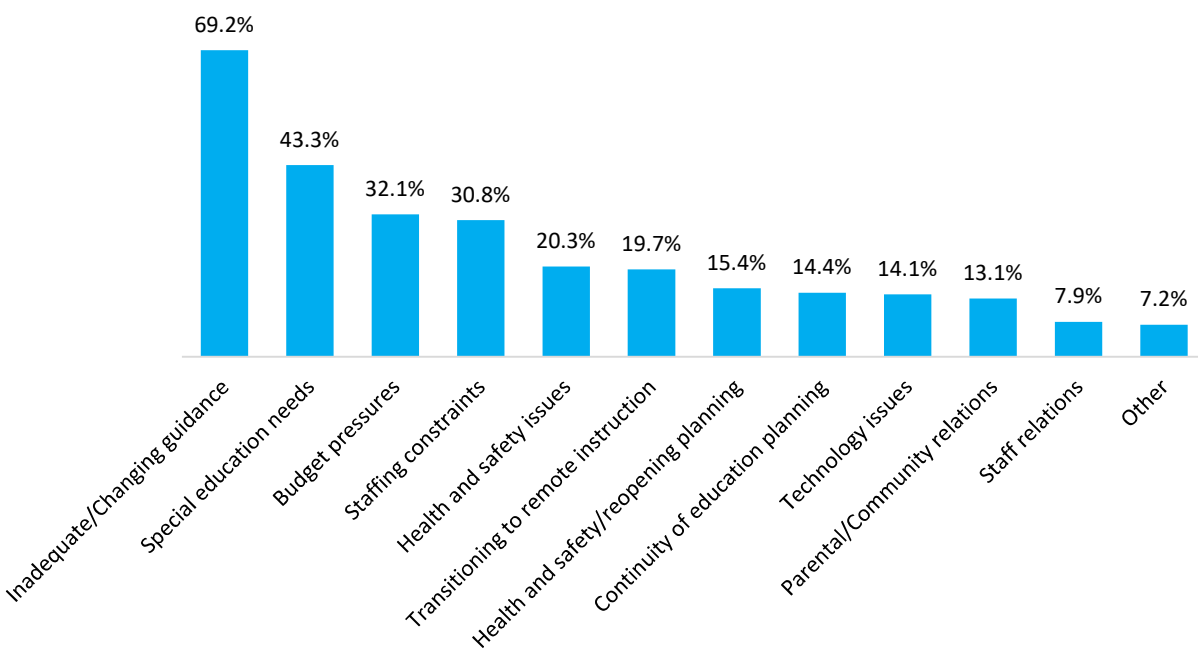
The State of Education

In the very near future PSBA intends to release its annual State of Education Report, which this year focuses entirely on the pandemic’s impacts on public education and includes information collected through a survey sent to all 500 school districts, as well as data available from sources such as the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In preparing for this testimony today, I thought that the Committee might benefit most from some information garnered from the soon to be released report.

As we look at the survey results, we see that over 99% of school districts reported experiencing a positive COVID-19 case among their students and/or staff, making an impact directly on their school community. And, for roughly two-thirds of school districts, the 2020-21 school year began with students not attending in-person classes full-time (five days a week). Additionally, since the start of the school year 85% of school districts have been forced to make changes to their instructional model due to the pandemic.

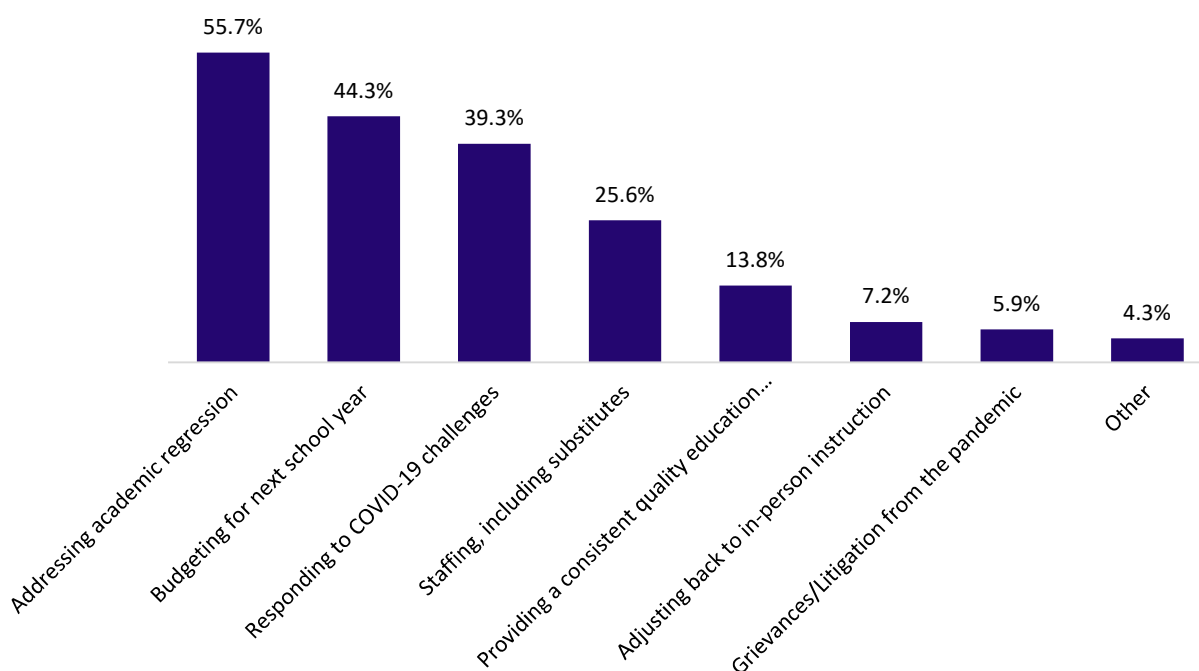
When digging down into specific challenges faced by school districts, we see that nearly 70% of school district leaders rated inadequate or consistently changing guidance from state, federal, and local agencies as one of their biggest challenges since the start of the pandemic. The pandemic also brought on or intensified many other challenges as shown in the graph below, including special education needs, budget pressures, and staffing constraints.

Biggest Challenges Since the Start of the Pandemic



As the pandemic lingers on into 2021, school leaders also expect to deal with a number of challenges caused by the pandemic in the future. Primary among them is how to identify and address the academic impacts of the pandemic caused by the reduction of face-to-face instructional time. School districts are working hard to identify, monitor, and address any academic regression that may have resulted from the pandemic using a variety of strategies such as diagnostic testing, tutoring, virtual meetings or phone calls with parents and students, plans for expanded summer school offerings, increased assistance available from teachers and paraprofessionals, and increased training and supports for teachers regarding virtual instruction.

Biggest Expected Challenges in the Coming Year



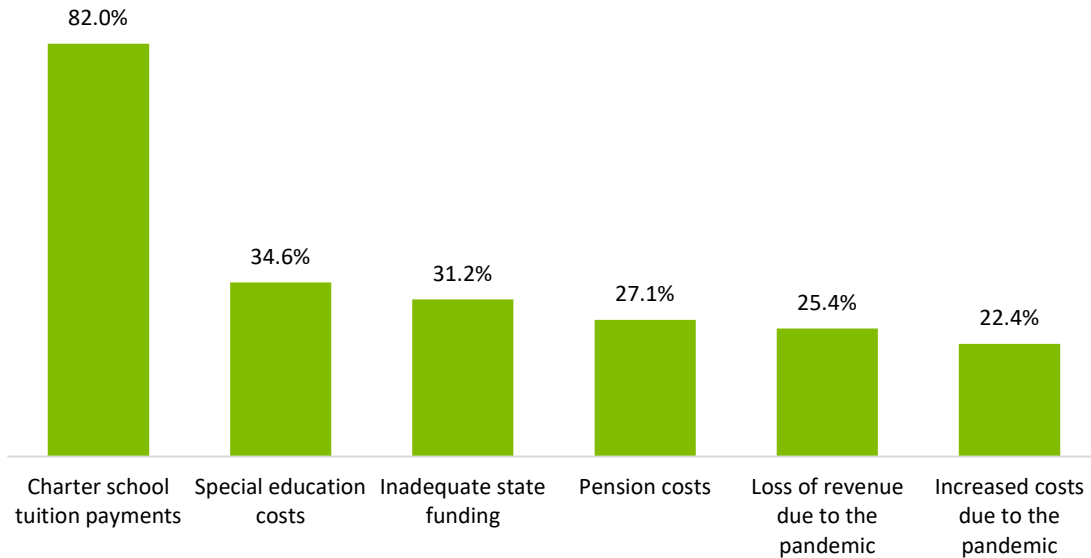
The challenges faced by school districts are also having significant impacts on employees, with three quarters of responding superintendents saying that they felt burned-out, and a majority of school districts experiencing, or expecting to experience, an increase in retirements or resignations as a result of the pandemic.

The pandemic has also brought many financial challenges for school districts, which have not only faced significantly increased costs in dealing with COVID-19, but which also expect to lose as much as \$850 million to \$1 billion in local tax revenue due to the pandemic.

Each State of Education survey includes a question concerning the top budget pressures facing school districts in order to gain insight into the areas causing the most financial pressure on their

budgets. Although the top four budget pressures have been the same in each of the five annual surveys, it is of note that an overwhelming number of school districts identified mandatory charter school tuition payments as one of their biggest sources of budget pressure this year.

Top Budget Pressures



While always a significant issue for school districts, the pandemic-induced mass exodus of students to cyber charter schools has further elevated the issue of charter school funding. At the start of the 2019-20 school year, 38,600 students were enrolled in a cyber charter school. However, by the start of the 2020-21 school year, that number had grown to 60,900 – a 58% increase. That increase in enrollments will conservatively lead to an estimated \$335.5 million increase in charter school tuition payments for school districts on top of the typically expected increase of at least \$125 million this year.

Public school leaders are grateful for, and applaud, the significant Federal stimulus funding being provided to public education in response to the pandemic as it will help school districts deal directly with the costs of the pandemic and prevent the catastrophic budget shortfalls that were anticipated. However, school districts also realize that this is one-time funding and that it will not resolve systemic funding concerns such as the overpayment of charter schools and increases in mandated costs such as pensions and special education. Additionally, many school leaders fully expect that while cyber charter enrollments will drop with the full return of in-person instruction, those enrollment numbers will stay at a higher level than they were pre-pandemic.

A Local Perspective

I would like to present a local perspective on the pandemic's impact on education. In the Upper Dublin School, when we closed our buildings last March, almost one full year ago, we were forced into remote teaching and learning. Largely asynchronous, teachers were providing assignments and assessments for students to complete. While our teachers were providing feedback, the model was not sustainable. Our Leadership Team worked to build the Cardinal Academy, our virtual program predicated on the use of the district curriculum taught by district teachers with real-time synchronous interaction. We further implemented true blended learning so that students at school and at home have the same educational experiences.

We have surveyed our community and the results showed that over 80% of our families and over 80% of our students were satisfied with our instruction models at the secondary level. A small but vocal group of parents and families have messaged their discontent with our instructional models on various social media platforms. Conversely, over 90% of our elementary parents and families and over 95% of our elementary students reported being satisfied with our instructional models. My board believes that our district's Leadership Team continues to provide the best opportunities possible for students given the parameters of our Health and Safety Plan.

Now more than ever the social and emotional well-being of students and staff is critical. We have been intentional in deploying our school counselors strategically to support students. We have also expanded access to Employee Assistance Programming for our staff. Further, we have provided additional planning and collaboration time for our staff as they continue to teach students during the pandemic.

Regarding the additional federal stimulus dollars, we have been careful to allocate stimulus dollars for one-time expenditures only. These funds are not being used to correct any structural deficit in our annual budget. To date we have received \$144,321 in ESSER 1 funding and we are currently waiting for \$550,756 in ESSER 2 funds. These funds have been used for technology, cleaning equipment/supplies, and programs to supplement online learning.

All Upper Dublin students attending charter schools are enrolled in cyber charter schools. Our district's costs for charter schools have been relatively low compared to our neighbors. Each regular education student costs the district \$17,750 and each special education student costs the district \$38,000. We have seen a significant increase in enrollment and costs this year compared to last year. Our expenditures for cyber charter schools have increased by approximately \$1 million over the previous fiscal year. We believe that our virtual program, which is taught by Upper Dublin teachers using the district curriculum is better for our students than enrolling in cyber charter schools.

The school district is expecting - and will plan for - large-scale reassessments, which will likely reduce our tax base in the future. The Fort Washington Office Park is within our district's footprint and has been a major contributor to our local property taxes. The efficacy of having remote workers has led to several companies no longer requiring employees to work onsite. While we are fortunate to have retail and other businesses in our district, their growth has been somewhat slowed by the pandemic.

The pandemic has created some budgetary savings in the areas of transportation and substitutes. However, expenditures for overall staffing are up because we have added positions to keep class sizes at acceptable levels so that we can comply with our Health and Safety Plan. Cleaning supplies and protective equipment have also been costly in our budget.

Teacher shortages are real, and the pandemic has made these shortages more pronounced. It has become more challenging to fill positions, particularly in certain areas (i.e. math, science, special education). Despite our best efforts to build a "bench" of substitutes, securing day to day subs has become more challenging than ever before. There simply are not enough substitutes to fill the vacancies in our district, let alone our region.

My superintendent often refers to Lincoln's quote "The most reliable way to predict the future is to create it". At Upper Dublin we are asking the hard questions about where we have been and where we could/should be. Should we return to what was or challenge ourselves to what public education could truly be. Let's take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent public education.

Due to the pandemic public education is reinventing itself – my school district is considering updating our delivery systems – blended learning that provides opportunities for personalized student learning. We are looking to create building schedules that allow for more acceleration, enrichment, remediation, and greater flexibility. Students must always come first, not the adults in the room. We are looking to build school schedules more conducive to optimal student learning including using best practices to determine optimal start times at all grade levels. We want to allow for more one term electives, dual enrollment opportunities and partnerships with local colleges/universities. We plan to focus assessment and grading structures on essential student outcomes for K-12 and post-secondary success. Everything we do must support the success of all students.

Returning to In-Person Instruction

Returning to in-person instruction is a high priority and focus of our members. There is nothing that school leaders and educators would like more than to bring students back into school building full-time. However, doing so safely as we continue to see high levels of COVID-19 transmission in many parts of the state remains a significant concern.

In fact, PSBA recently joined with nine other statewide education associations to encourage the Governor's administration to work on prioritizing eligibility for the COVID-19 vaccine to administrators, educators, and staff in order to speed-up the return of students to the classroom. Unlike 26 other states, Pennsylvania's vaccination plan does not prioritize these individuals like it could and should, and, while we recognize that vaccine supply is an issue everywhere, the rollout of the vaccine so far has been slow at best.

PSBA's members strongly believe that prioritizing school staff members for the vaccine would offer a new level of safety and confidence for staff, students, and families, and help speed the safe return to in-person instruction. For this reason, we were disheartened to hear the response that the administration does not intend to make further efforts to prioritize vaccine eligibility for school staff members.

Recommendations

PSBA believes there are many ways in which the General Assembly can continue to support public schools during this crisis, but today we will focus on just two areas where we believe the most beneficial impacts could be made:

Permanent Mandate Waiver Program – As public schools and the General Assembly are faced with the significant economic impacts of COVID-19 we need solutions which provide savings and flexibility without the need for new or additional state appropriations. One specific solution that PSBA's members are asking for is broad, permanent relief from mandates that consume much of their budgets and can stifle innovation.

Public school leaders fully supported including the temporary mandate waiver program as part of the emergency pandemic legislation in Act 13 of 2020 which received unanimous support in the Legislature. However, the waiver provisions in Act 13 were only available for April, May, and June of 2020, and school leaders need a permanent solution that will continue in future years. Therefore, PSBA urges the Legislature to permanently reinstate a mandate waiver program like the highly popular and successful one which operated in Pennsylvania from 2000 to 2010 - such as the proposal introduced in Senate Bill 73 by Senator Wayne Langerholc.

Charter School Funding Reform – The current charter school funding formula was established in 1997 under the state's Charter School Law and has not been changed in the 24 years since it was first created. Because the tuition rate calculations are based on the school district's expenses, they create wide discrepancies in the amount of tuition paid by different districts for the same charter school education and result in drastic

overpayments to charter schools – especially when it comes to special education and cyber charter tuition payments. PSBA once again urges the Legislature to work to help save taxpayer dollars by adopting charter school funding reforms that are predictable, accurate and reflect the actual costs to educate students in regular and special education programs, and in cyber charter schools.

Conclusion

The last year in public education has truly been unprecedented. The pandemic has forced public schools to close school buildings, transition all students to remote learning, and work to reopen school buildings again during a national health emergency. School leaders, teachers, and staff should be proud of how they stepped up in a time of need to navigate these challenges to provide a quality education and services to the 1.7 million students enrolled in Pennsylvania’s public schools.

While public education has been fraught with tremendous obstacles, we are confident that with strong, continued support from the General Assembly, as well as the Governor and state agencies, we can overcome the uniquely difficult challenges our schools and communities are facing. On behalf of PSBA, I want to thank you for your attention to, and support for, our public schools, and for this opportunity to provide input. I will be happy to take any questions.