

Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee

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Written Testimony Submitted By:

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Esteemed Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Today, over a year since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we as school leaders reflect on a challenging thirteen months and plan for a healthy, safe future. The resilience of our students, the commitment of our teachers and the innovations of science have brought us to where we are today, to a place of great optimism.

I extend my gratitude to the members of the administration and this committee who have taken into consideration the needs of the next generation – our learners – and have allowed me as a nonpublic school leader, to put my kids first.

I am the Head of School at Abrams Hebrew Academy in Yardley, PA, a community day school serving families of all Jewish backgrounds. We provide our students with a healthy and supportive environment that fosters scholarship and intellectual curiosity, love of learning, and a commitment to heritage.

I'd like to begin by sharing the trajectory of our school's experience this past year and where we are headed.

Last March, we swiftly transitioned to virtual school. We conducted each and every class on Zoom, with our full dual-curriculum schedule. We raised money to secure devices for students who did not already have access. We connected needy families with kosher child nutrition opportunities. We were able to mine our resources, stretch ourselves, and do what we do best: serve our students and help them thrive, regardless of the circumstances. We participated in campaigns to advocate for our students in all these areas.

Over the summer, we geared up for a fully in-person educational schedule for the Fall, in complete accord with Pennsylvania orders. With masks and strict social distancing, with plexi-glass, use of outdoor spaces, and endless amounts of sanitizing agents, we have conducted in-person school since August. Our most vulnerable students are back in the classroom, and we are proud.

By strictly adhering to Department of Health guidance, we have shut down certain classes or pods when needed and we impose strict travel rules, of our own volition.

The Federal Paycheck Protection Program allowed our school to stay afloat and see a brighter future. We enrolled 50 new students transferring from other schools at the start of this year – a stark display of parents' confidence in what we are safely offering our children. With great disappointment, we were denied Federal Cares Act ESSER monies that were intended for

nonpublic schools, because of barriers imposed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and our local school districts. We are hopeful that the next rounds of funds will help our school.

At this moment, we are looking at a safe, vibrant student body, and we are grateful to all the members who support programs and policies that have helped us accomplish this.

And we look to a brighter future.

1. The Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program has allowed our school to serve any child who would like to be here. The children who needed those devices for virtual school and those who benefit from Federal nutrition programs – those children have a place at my school because of the EITC and OSTC programs. With continued growth of that program, we can see a stronger educational landscape emerge in Pennsylvania. Access to a quality education of a family's choice, which best suits that child, positions our kids for future success.

2. Safety Grants through PDE and PCCD have helped keep Jewish schools safe, in light of reprehensible hate-based violence and school violence in our society. These programs are vital, and I urge you to continue investing in the safety of Pennsylvania's nonpublic at-risk schools. While the grants offered are highly competitive, and even though our schools have encountered challenges with Intermediate Unit administration of the PDE program, we have been able to bolster the safety of many of our schools and hope to continue doing so, with your support.

3. School nurses are needed to screen, contact trace, shape policy, communicate with departments of health, correspond with families at all hours of the day and so much more. Pennsylvania must invest more in the health and safety of all schools and expand the hours of service to nonpublic schools or offer a medical staff reimbursement. This will help communities stem viral spread.

With access to the education model that suits a child, with health safety and physical security, our schools are ready to deploy a great curriculum and launch students into a bright future.

4. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) is the way of the future, as PDE has stated "students need to be equipped to enter the workforce and be successful in a tech-driven, global economy". The Commonwealth has begun establishing avenues for public school students to enter this work force, and has discussed "equitable access to STEM learning experiences for every learner, from early childhood to higher education". We hope these programs will grow in Pennsylvania and include nonpublic school students.

5. Lastly, as you consider how programs are administered, I would ask you to consider some of the challenges we have faced as nonpublic schools. For instance, PDE's Safe Schools program is now administered mostly by Intermediate Units. Some IUs will share information and guidance in a timely manner and are equipped to help schools, while others share information a week behind schedule and create extra barriers to participate. The same has been true with School Districts in administration of ESSER and the general Title Programs. We hope that communication about programs and guidelines can be more consistent in the future and we would be happy to discuss this further and provide examples.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and participate in this important conversation.
I am grateful for your dedication to the Commonwealth and all our children.

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