

Hello and thank you to Senator Martin and Senator Dush for the opportunity to speak today and be a part of this hearing.

I am Barry Fillman, the director of Jeff Tech.

I am grateful for this opportunity and I could not be more proud to represent Jeff Tech today. We are a career center in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania experiencing remarkable growth and I am so proud of the staff, the students and community that surrounds us and supports us for the incredible things I witness every day. We stayed open all last year and day 186 for my teachers, maintenance and custodial staff, cafeteria staff, support staff and administration was as proud as I will ever be of a professional organization. It is awe inspiring to see students doing so many things that I may never be able to accomplish and no group anywhere works harder than my colleagues to make that happen.

I did not come here today to take sides in a debate over the efficacy of masks or to attempt to bridge the gap between two sides entrenched in with their views. I am not going to drown you in data. I did not come trying to push for one-upmanship and win at all cost posturing or trying to find loopholes in legislation. I came here today with hope in my heart and my honest plea for all of us.

These are unfathomable times to say the least. I recognize that no decision is easy related to what lies in front of us and much of what is coming continues to be unknown. The leadership in all of our districts and schools is stretched to the limit in normal years because we have already trimmed the fat to be responsible to the people that pay our bills. We were already prepared for another year like no other. We were promised that decisions would be local. Looking back, we should never have accepted this misleading statement, but we did. After all, it was repeated for months. We started our year with smiling students glad to be back and it may be surprising not huge issues with COVID. Then a bomb went off in education in Pennsylvania. I know it is extremely hard for those of you that do not work in our buildings to comprehend the carnage that ensued. Trapped between political ideals and a policy war there has been a deluge of anger.

Here is where that anger comes from. Families still believe they matter, because they do. They matter to me, even when it hurts. So families show up at our doors while we do our best, they show up at our board meetings, they pull students out of our buildings for alternative educations. We listen. We have conversations and attempt to resolve what we can. The people in our school environments have little control over what was created when this fire was lit. Threats from the government pile on to an already intense situation. But you should realize this – GREAT people, great ones are being pushed to a breaking point. The only thing that can solve this is for people from both sides to get together, actually work together and figure out a way to involve families, not to push them out. We are tasked with involving students and parents on our comprehensive planning committees, advisory boards, and various other school committees and groups. Yet, their feedback does not have a home in state decisions.

Pushing parents out of the process with a poorly written, ill-timed mandate and then stoking their pain without actually solving their grievance is taking its toll. We have now had two years to get it right and this is really the best we could do? Consequential board members resigning or not running again because they are tired of what has been created is the tip of the iceberg. I cannot comprehend how my school nurse manages it all. Professionally and with poise she deals with people that are angry. They are not actually angry at her, but they take it out on her. They are not angry at administrators, but they take it out on them. Can you imagine being the parent of a victim of severe trauma and having to take

your son or daughter to multiple doctors and have the child relive the experience repeatedly hoping that this will be the doctor willing to recognize the humanity in your child? We as school administrators have been put in a position to absorb everything that politics creates and it is breaking the will of decent, loving people. They cannot get at you to air their grievances. They come to us.

I will not speak for the superintendents I have the privilege to work with, and they are really good ones, but I will guarantee you this they show up every day and figure it out. They leave everything they have at work. So does every staff member I have. But, we all deserve real help in this, a partnership. I long for the opportunity for teachers to teach and leaders to talk about and support education with their efforts instead of playing a game set up by people that do not understand the ramifications of their decisions and the manner in which they roll things out.

It does not matter what I personally feel about your decisions. What matters are the students and a focus on education. What matters is trust, that people do something because it is right and that they keep their word. I tell young adults these truths all the time. We work so hard to build trust with all of our stakeholders, especially our families, and I am begging you to stop pitting us against one another at every level. Our students deserve better.

Tomorrow I will return to the greatest job I will ever have, where I come from. I will continue to meet with parents, show love and compassion to students and cheer on my staff. These are under my control. We cannot remain fixed in this situation year after year. At some point, I hope, compromise, true leadership and love will bring this entire discussion to a close with a reasonable, localized, long term solution.... For students and their families and for all of us in the trenches of education.