



Tuesday, March 23, 2023

Good Morning Senator Argall and Senator Williams:

Please accept my gratitude for being here with you this morning. I would also like to say thank you to the entire Senate Education Committee for your leadership in the Commonwealth and for providing the opportunity to discuss topics that have a significant impact on the education we provide our students.

I am the proud Superintendent of the Upper Darby School District - a community that represents over 90 different languages and a student population of over 12,400 students. We currently operate 14 schools:

- 3 Grades K-5 buildings
- 7 Grades 1-5 buildings
- 1 Kindergarten Center
- 2 Middle Schools
- 1 Comprehensive High School

Our very diverse 12,400 student population consists of over 2,500 students receiving special education support, 2,000 students identified as English Language Learners, 289 students experiencing homelessness, 100 students in foster care, and thousands of students living in a multiple occupancy home environment or under a support affidavit attending our schools. We are entirely a free breakfast and lunch program (National Lunch Program) school district. We are a school district that has been recognized as one of the 100 most underfunded school districts in Pennsylvania. I am sure that you are well aware of the need to fund public schools in Pennsylvania, and the negative impact underfunding has had on public schools for some time. This underfunding has crippled the education profession, hindered student achievement and growth, and has left many of the school facilities in Pennsylvania and the country in either disrepair or in

need of significant renovations and safety improvements. This morning, I would like to share with you why school districts similar to the Upper Darby School District need additional funding in order to improve facilities to meet the needs of the students who enter our schools. Currently, our District provides educational opportunities to students in need of autistic support, life skills support, students who are multi-disabled and requiring specific nursing care, emotional support students, special education students, gifted students, English Learners (ELs), and students in the general education learning environment. Our schools simply lack the appropriate space to provide the level of support every student needs. The first barrier we face in our District happens to be the age of our school facilities.

Age of District Facilities in Upper Darby School District

The District currently operates 11 Elementary Schools that function as schools providing services to students in grades 1-5, K-5, and one kindergarten center. A few of our school buildings were constructed in the 1920s.

Aronimink Elementary School 1937 (1-5)
 Bywood Elementary School 1926 (1-5)
 Charles Kelly Elementary School (leased facility) (1-5)
 Garrettford Elementary School 1940 (1-5)
 Highland Park Elementary School 1975 (1-5)
 Hillcrest Elementary School 1950 (K-5)
 Primos Elementary School 1947 (K-5)
 Stonehurst Hills Elementary School 1926 (1-5)
 Walter M. Senkow Elementary School (leased facility) (1-5)
 Westbrook Park Elementary School 1950 (K-5)
 K-Center 1928 (K serving all 1-5 only elementary schools)

The District also currently operates two middle schools with over 2,800 students and a high school with over 4,200 students. We do have plans to build a third middle school, but the cost of a new middle school is substantial. On average, the school facilities in our district are 85 years old with some schools over 100 years old.

Beverly Hills Middle School 1920 (6-8)
 Drexel Hill Middle School 1957 (6-8)
 Upper Darby High School 1951, 1972 addition, 1999 addition (9-12)

The older school facilities we have were not designed to meet current educational requirements for not only academic standards, but also current safety standards. It becomes even more apparent and obvious in schools that are overcrowded.

Overcrowding, Educational Specifications and Learning Environments

The Upper Darby School District currently provides educational opportunities to over 12,400 students. As I have previously mentioned, many of our school facilities are older and do not currently meet educational specification recommendations for square footage, and the lack of appropriate classroom space and size forces us to use areas in our school buildings that were never intended to be used as classroom spaces. Since 2005, the District has attempted to balance facilities constraints and the need for educational space with what the community could afford. The Upper Darby School District is certainly not alone when it comes to finding creative solutions to facilities needs when funding streams and financial support has been a barrier. In 2005, due to overcrowding at Bywood Elementary School and financial limitations at the time, the District entered into a lease with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for a school located outside of boundaries of the township in Glenolden (Walter M. Senkow Elementary School, formerly St. George). Unfortunately, this did not solve the need for additional space. As a result, in 2007, the District entered into another lease with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for another school located within the township (Charles Kelley Elementary School, formerly St. Charles).

The need for space did not stop with the leasing of these two former parochial elementary schools. The District also purchased trailers/modular classrooms that were over 20 years old at the time they were purchased and have remained in place for over another 20 years. Most of our elementary schools lack a gym and cafeteria and some have only a gym or cafeteria. In our district, it is not unusual for students to be eating lunch in a cafeteria that is actually a basement which also happens to be the same space where physical education classes take place. In some buildings, this is taking place at the same time and the shared space is only separated by a curtain. In your typical elementary school or middle school, students would receive their instruction in music, art, reading support, special education support, or English Language (EL) instruction in classroom spaces that help them reach their fullest potential. It is not unusual for students to receive additional reading and other academic support in the hallway. We also have students receiving their music class and instrumental lessons in the hallway or other cramped spaces because we simply do not have the instructional space in our older facilities. More and more students are entering our schools with needed support in the areas of reading, math, writing, mental health, and English Language learning, and we are in need of additional space. Next year alone, we

anticipate over 20 more students in need of autistic support entering our elementary program.

Fast forward to where we are today, and we have a historical court ruling on the fundamental right to properly fund public education in the Commonwealth, and with that, an opportunity to begin to improve long overdue infrastructure issues with school facilities. With this in mind, I know that any consideration of 'turning on' PlanCon would require a school district to have completed a facilities study.

Long Term Facilities Plan

In Upper Darby School District, we have recently completed a facilities study that includes short-term and long-term planning. I have copies of a presentation we provided to our community this past February. We provided our Board of School Directors and the public with a condition assessment of our school facilities and a capacity needs analysis. In order to clearly articulate short-term and long-term facilities needs, we contracted with outside consultants who provided us with a formula and overall Facility Condition Index Score (FCI Score). When reviewing our facilities, our consultant reviewed the following: Architectural Finishes, Classroom Additions, Building Envelope, Grounds, Mechanical and Automated Systems, Electrical Systems, Plumbing Systems, ADA/Code Compliance, Specialities, and Security Systems. The review was completed with the school facilities owned by the District and not any leased facilities. The FCI Score comes from the following formula provided by our consultant:

Cost of repairs needed/maintenance divided by the cost to replace= FCI Score

If a facility has a FCI Score of less than 15%, it is considered as being in very good shape with minimal capital funding required to improve a facility. If a facility's FCI-Score is between 25-45%, it is recommended that you consider replacing the system, and a score of between 45-60% will require you to consider a major renovation. A school district facility with a FCI-Score of greater than 60% should be considered for closing or replacement. In the Upper Darby School District, our FCI-Scores ranged from 25-60% with no FCI-Score of greater than 60%. The short-term and long-term facilities plan we have in place in our district provides us with anticipated costs associated with capital project improvements. Our total first-look costs, without air conditioning in our school facilities, came to over \$270 million, and our first-look costs with air conditioning in our school facilities came to over \$280 million. These costs do not include the need for a new elementary school and new middle school.

The capacity study we presented and I have provided you for reference this morning further demonstrates our need for increased funding and infrastructural support. When we take into consideration an industry standard for targeted room utilization in an elementary school setting at 90% utilization and between 85-90% for a middle school setting, our school district is in need of a new elementary school or space that can accommodate approximately 1162 students and a new middle school that would provide us with at least 56 classrooms. We recognize that we are not able to do all of this at one time, but there are some absolute short-term goals we can no longer afford to ignore.

Financial Benefits of PlanCon to School Districts Similar to Upper Darby

The Upper Darby School District is currently in the process of renovating and expanding Aronimink Elementary School. We hope to begin construction on a new middle school during the 2023-2024 school year, and a new elementary school sometime soon after the construction of the middle school. If the new PlanCon formula that was adopted in 2019 was implemented today, the Upper Darby School District would potentially receive as much as \$15 million for a new middle school in Clifton Heights, an estimated \$10 million for a new elementary school, and we would have been eligible for as much as \$7 million for the addition and renovations at Aronimink Elementary School. In total, this is approximately \$30 million in reimbursement for much needed renovations, improvements, and new facilities. I understand that the current PlanCon Maintenance Program could help offset some of these costs for school districts like Upper Darby. I recognize that the Maintenance Program requires a 50% match, and while we certainly appreciate any effort to help offset costs, this match is still a financial strain for our district. I also know that the program has not received funding at this point. Perhaps the committee would consider a district's aid ratio, similar to the Basic Ed Funding Formula, for the PlanCon Maintenance Program. It is our hope that PlanCon is reestablished so that the overwhelming financial responsibility does not rest with local taxpayers in Upper Darby Township, Clifton Heights Borough, and Millbourne Borough.

Thank you for your time and consideration this morning. I know that you are all in elected positions where the expectation is to meet the needs of the constituents you serve. I hope that you take the information I have provided you this morning into consideration when you make your decisions about funding public education in the Commonwealth.