

Testimony: PA Senate Education Committee

Statement of

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for the

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I am a Senior Fellow in Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and began collecting data on schools' responses to the pandemic almost immediately after the emergence of COVID-19 closed schools across the nation in mid-March 2020. As a data centered analyst of national education issues, when faced with an almost complete lack of data on what was going on in America's schools, I began collecting the data I sought. My team completed the first nationally representative survey on public school responses to the pandemic in late March of 2020, and completed 6 follow-up surveys during the school closures of spring 2020. The following year, I launched the Return to Learn Tracker, which monitored more than 8,500 school districts remote instructional offerings each week of the 2020-21 school year. The following year we monitored school districts' mask mandates weekly. We also monitored enrollment changes over the pandemic. The Return to Learn Tracker covered 90 percent or more of public school students in multiple aspect of school districts operations, and proved to be the most comprehensive and timely data available on public schools responses to the pandemic.

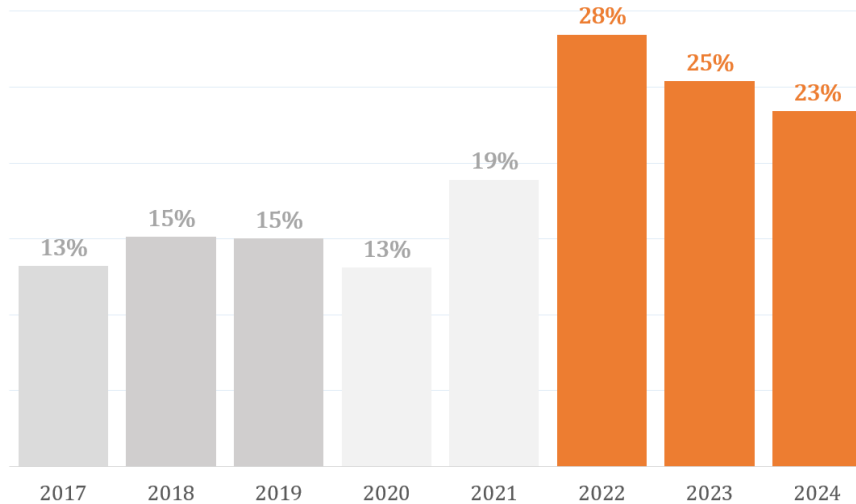
In summer of 2022, anecdotal reports indicated that school attendance was down substantially, and that chronic absenteeism was dramatically higher compare to pre-pandemic baselines. I began collecting chronic absenteeism data at the district level, to match the unit of analysis in other Return to Learn data collections, as states released them. Unfortunately the absenteeism problem is still very much with us, which is why I am testifying today, and why I continue to collect these data from the states.

National trends in chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism, the percentage of students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year, was a significant, but stable, problem before the pandemic. As shown in Figure 1, about 15 percent of students nationally were chronically absent in both the 2018 and 2019 school years (I refer to school years using the spring year). It is worth noting that this baseline was a problematic rate, and includes one in seven K-12 students in the US, or about three students in each classroom. After the pandemic, that rate jumped almost 90 percent to include over 28 percent of students in 2022.

That dramatic increase means 6 million more students were chronically absent in 2022 than there was in 2019. There are many potential reasons for this dramatic increase, but one of the chief suspects in 2022 would still be the prevalence of COVID. The highest rates of Covid cases during the pandemic occurred in December of that school year with the surging Omicron wave.

Figure 1. Chronic absenteeism 2017-2024



Despite the dramatic fall in COVID case rates by the 2023 school year, chronic absenteeism remained substantially higher than pre-pandemic baseline. This pattern can be seen as a glass half full or half empty. The good news is that chronic absenteeism rates fell by three percentage points. The bad news was that, especially given the relief from COVID, it did not fall more.

For the 2023-24 school year, data on 47 states suggest a similar story occurred last year. Rates fell, by about 2 percentage points, but remain stubbornly high at 23.5 percent of students. In 2024, almost 12 million students missed at least 10% of the school year, about 4.25 million more than did in the years before the pandemic.

State trends in chronic absenteeism.

Looking across states demonstrates what appear to be clear differences between state's chronic absenteeism. However, there is more similarities than first appear. A broad look across state changes clearly suggest that chronic absenteeism is a problem not specific to Pennsylvania, but one evident across the nation and in every state in the nation.

State chronic absenteeism rates differ, but comparisons should not be made with great confidence because what counts as an absence differs from state to state. That difference can yield considerably different absenteeism rates across states, even if the underlying attendance is the same. Due to differences at the base layer of attendance taking, caution should be used in cross state comparisons.

Figure 2 below displays the chronic absenteeism rates, weight by number of students, for 40 states in 2019 and 2022 through 2024. (I omit 2018 data because it is quite similar to the 2019 data, and omit the data for 2020 and 2021 because during the pandemic attendance data quality is suspect.)

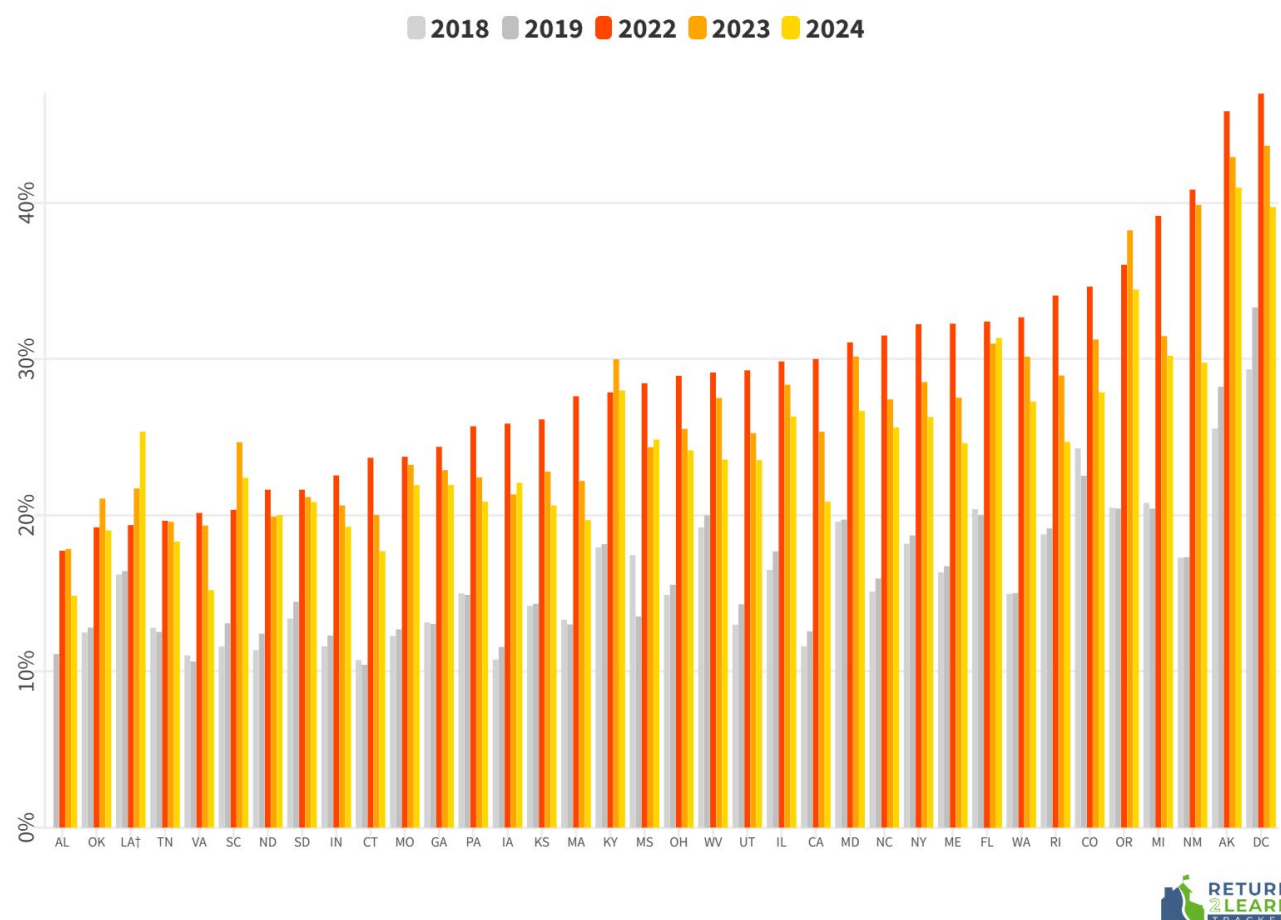
Figure 2 demonstrates large differences between state rates, some of which are real differences in attendance and some of which is potential bias from data collection rules and processes. What is common across every state is a marked increase between 2019 and 2022. In every state but 6, chronic absenteeism rates improved between 2022 and 2023. Of the 45 state with current 2024 data, all but 6 had improvements between 2023 and 2024.

Pennsylvania's absenteeism rates are quite similar to the national pattern.¹ Both were about 15 percent prior to the pandemic, but Pennsylvania's increase during the pandemic was slightly less than the national

¹ I will note that there are differences between Pennsylvania's posted state rates and rates I use in the Return to Learn Tracker. The Return to Learn Tracker uses the same methodology for every state, and only uses district level data and then deriving weighted averages across districts. In some states, individual students who are chronically

average, at 11 instead of 13 percentage points. The decreases in both 2023 and 2024 in Pennsylvania were quite similar to the national average and 3 and 2 percentage points.

Figure 2. State Chronic Absenteeism Rates: 2018-2024



One way to gauge the progress Pennsylvania districts have made on reducing chronic absenteeism is to gauge the number that are on track to get back to their 2019 pre-pandemic baseline in 5 years. This is an ambitious goal for states and districts, but one warranted given the damage absenteeism poses to students and to school operations. Weighted by number of students, districts have reduced chronic absenteeism to make 46 percent of the way back to pre-pandemic rates in the past two years of data, which is above the 40 percent expectation for a 5 year rate.

A slightly higher percentage, 52 percent, of Pennsylvania students attend districts that had closed at least 40 percent of the pandemic increase in absenteeism. Nin percent were in districts that were on pace to meet the 5 year goal in 2023, but fell off that pace in 2024, and the remaining 39 percent of students attended districts that were not on pace in either 2023 or 2024.

absent in more than one district, because they are enrolled in more than one district in the same year, are only counted once at the state level, which could lead to differences between R2L and state estimates. I also exclude districts that are primarily virtual schools, are juvenile justice institutions, or a county offices of education. These different decision rules yield slight differences, but not substantively different results.)

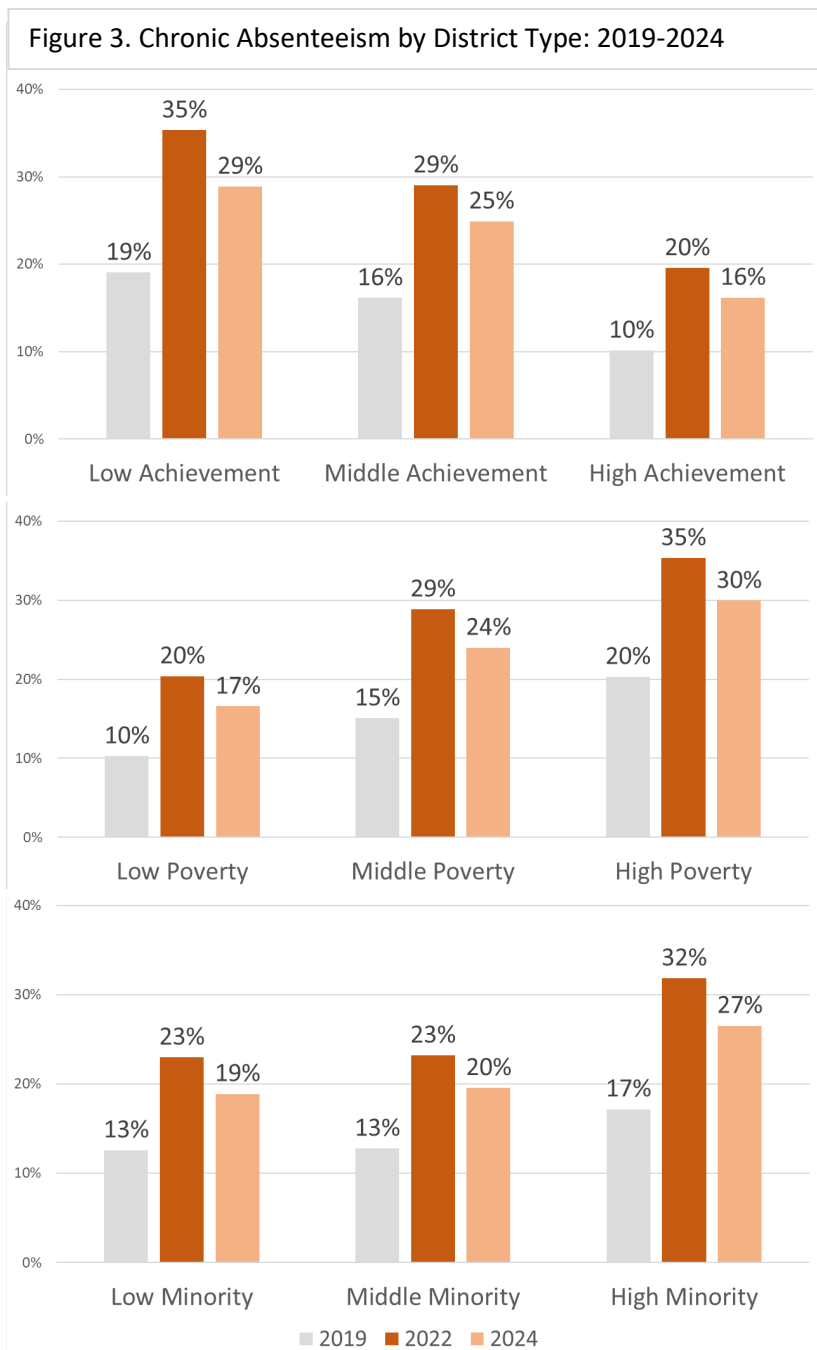
Chronic absenteeism across kinds of school districts.

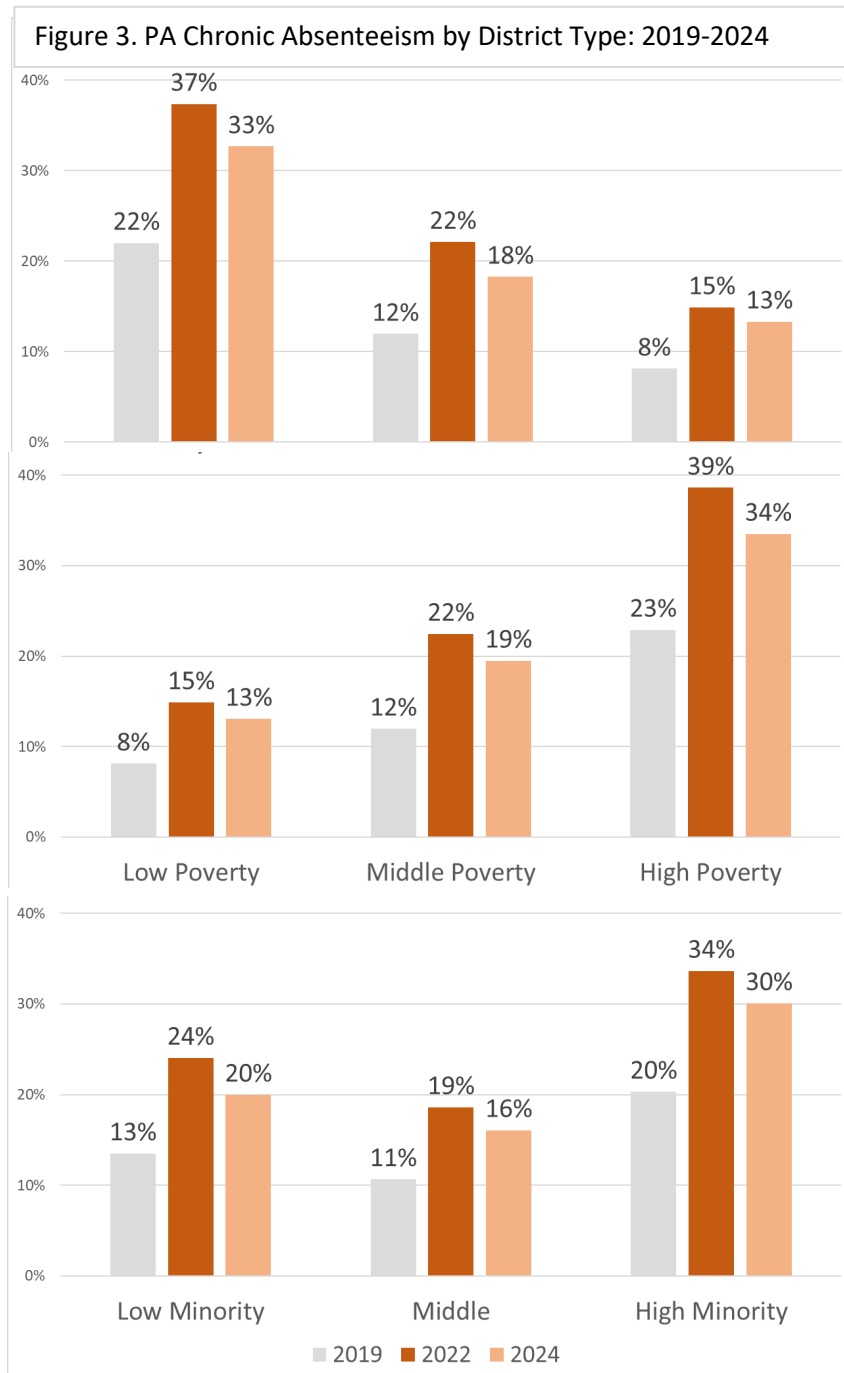
With district-level data from across the county, I can describe what district types have higher rates of chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic. The national pattern is simple: Increases in chronic absenteeism were widespread during the pandemic, with 97 percent of students nationally, and 94% in Pennsylvania attending a school district whose 2022 chronic absenteeism rate was higher than it was in 2019. This largely remains true in 2024 for 95 percent of students nationally and 92 percent of Pennsylvania students.

However, nationally percentage-point increases were larger in districts that already had higher chronic absenteeism rates in 2019. In

contrast, the percentage increase, relative to their differing pre-pandemic baselines were quite similar. In the following charts I divide districts into terciles (or thirds) by different characteristics.

Increases in chronic absenteeism were most glaring in districts with low pre-pandemic academic achievement. (See Figure 4.) In the third of districts with the lowest achievement, chronic absenteeism jumped 16 percentage points, from 19 to 35 percent, between 2019 and 2022. Meanwhile, in the third of districts with the highest achievement, rates doubled during the same period, increasing 10 points, from 10 to 20 percent. Increases by poverty were similar, with rates in high-poverty districts increasing from 20 to 35 percent, while rates in low-poverty districts increased from 10 to 20 percent. The pattern was less stark by the percentage of non-white students: Chronic absenteeism rose by 15 points, from 17 to 32 percent, in high-minority districts but by less in middle- and low-minority districts—from 13 to 23 percent, each. By 2024, declines for most of these categories are relatively





consistent. The most disadvantaged districts have larger percentage point declines, but they are fairly proportional to their pre-pandemic baseline. In other words, district differed in their relative rates of absenteeism before and since the pandemic, but all show a similar pattern over time, with proportional improvements since the 2022 peak.

Pennsylvania districts display fairly similar patterns seen across the nation. Figure 5 shows differences between terciles of Pennsylvania districts by achievement. In the third of districts with the lowest achievement, chronic absenteeism jumped 15 percentage points, to 37 percent, between 2019 and 2022, and improved by 4 points by 2024. Meanwhile, in the third of districts with the highest achievement, rates nearly doubled during the same period, increasing 8 points, from 8 to 15 percent, and with smaller recovery since 2022. Increases by poverty showed similar patterns, but by percentage of non-white students there is a different pattern. The middle category of minority students shows a

lower rates of chronic absenteeism in all three years. At least in Pennsylvania, minority composition appears to have a less uniform relationship to absenteeism than other factors, or compared to the rest of the nation.

There are three broad and sobering conclusions that can be drawn from these comparisons in the US and in Pennsylvania. First, the spike in chronic absenteeism is both severe and widespread, with no district type spared a substantial increase of 75 percent or less in 2022. Second, decreases in absenteeism appear proportional between 2022 and 2024, which is encouraging on the whole, but still warrants focus for the extended future. And third, chronic absenteeism has increased, and remains highest in the most

disadvantaged districts, the same districts that experienced the greatest learning losses during the pandemic and can least afford the harms that come with chronic absenteeism.

Responding to post pandemic chronic absenteeism.

I believe that post-pandemic chronic absenteeism is the number one issue facing public schools in the nation, and likely in Pennsylvania, today. Covid learning loss is still a very real and dire challenge and certainly deserves the focus of the governor, state legislators, policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers, parents and students. However, with absenteeism at the rates we are still seeing, and its reduction proving so stubborn, I do not believe pandemic academic recovery is practically possible until we solve post-pandemic attendance recovery. It will take the immediate focus of all those aforementioned groups—the governor, state legislators, policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers, parents and students—to solve the absenteeism crisis.

I will close with four points. The first is that chronic absenteeism is a pointed indicator, but attendance broadly is the core problem that deserves focus. The second is on the need for urgency and leadership on this issue. The third is to address the underlying nature of the pandemic surge in absenteeism. The final is on the necessity of bringing every resource to bear in this fight.

First, attendance is a very broad problem. Chronic absenteeism has become the most common accountability indicator for attendance, and for good reason. Chronically absent students do have far worse outcomes than consistent attenders. However, the root problem is a rise in absences in general, and increase are evident across all kinds of students. A more general focus on absenteeism is important because the downturn in attendance effects the vast majority of students. The tolls on student outcomes are marked for chronically absent students, but still affect those with elevated absences that fall short of chronic levels. The majority of missed school days are not missed by chronically absent students. Put simply, the attendance problem is a problem for most students, not just the one in 5 Pennsylvania students who are chronically absent (as of 2023-24), and thus the focus should be on improving attendance across the board.

Second, I urge you to engage in leadership on this urgent problem. Chronic absenteeism should be the highest priority for public schools in Pennsylvania and education is one of the primary responsibilities of state and local governments. The increase in chronic absenteeism should also be a priority because it is a functional tax on the citizens of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvanian's taxes fund Pennsylvania's schools. Students are achieving less than they were, in large part because students are not attending consistently. It stands to reason that as long as this increase in absenteeism continues, Pennsylvania can be taxed the same amount for lower educational outputs—meaning less learning, a less prepared citizenry, less economic output and less human flourishing—or send more taxes to manage the same pre-pandemic achievement with less consistent attendance. Either way chronic absenteeism is a functional tax on Pennsylvanians, and the best means of alleviating that increase is returning Pennsylvania students to consistent attendance we were accustomed to just 5 years ago.

Third, we should be clear-eyed about the cause of the pandemic surge in absenteeism. There are many causes of absenteeism, legitimate and illegitimate, but the increases do not appear to be tied to any particular cause or causes that explain the dramatic increase. In multiple ways, the patterns of absenteeism seen before the pandemic are similar after the pandemic and the reasons student provide for absences also appear similar. The primary difference post-pandemic is that we are seeing more absences across the board. I believe the primary explanation is that absenteeism is seen as less of a concern today than it was in 2020, by parents and students as well as by school staff. The problem we are facing does not appear to be a narrow policy challenge, but a change in our culture. If I am correct, the daunting challenge we face

is to change culture around school attendance, and effect widespread changes in school family and student behavior.

Finally, I urge you to bring every resource to curb the post-pandemic rise in absenteeism. There are many who will claim that additional consequences are needed to curb absenteeism. Such arguments are often met with criticism, with the logic that consequences can be alienating and that additional supports are necessary. Student supports are needed, and Pennsylvania's schools should provide reasonable supports where they can effectively improve attendance. However, the choice between consequences and supports is a false one. Given the scope of this problem, and the severity of its current and future consequences, the only sensible path forward to change student and family behaviors at scale is to provide needed supports with empathy and to institute reasonable consequences with resolve. Simply put, this struggle will require both carrots and sticks to win.

Before the pandemic chronic absenteeism was a significant, but stable, challenge for schools and students. During the pandemic, the normalized attendance patterns in our country were destabilized and shifted dramatically. The question we are facing now is where attendance patterns will re-stabilize, where the new post-pandemic normal will be. Time may be running short to push normalized attendance patterns towards a reasonable "new normal." I commend the senate for taking this challenge seriously and urge deliberate and effective action to improve attendance in Pennsylvania schools.