



Senate Education Committee

Senator Wayne Langerholc, Jr.

Chairman

Room 187 Capitol Building, Senate Box 203035, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120-3035 • (717) 787-5400 • FAX: (717) 772-0573

Public Hearing “Continuity of Education” COVID-19

Monday, May 11, 2020

Senate Chamber

11:00 am to 1:00 pm

11:00 – 11:10

Opening Remarks

Senator Wayne Langerholc, Jr.

Andrew Dinniman

11:10 – 11:50

Pennsylvania Department of Education

Secretary Pedro Rivera, *Department of Education*

11:55 – 12:45

Public School Panel

Nathan Mains, CEO, Pennsylvania School Board Association

Ana Meyers, Executive Director, PA Coalition of Public Charter Schools

Rich Askey, President, PA State Education Association

Dr. John George, Executive Director, PA Association of Intermediate Units

12:50 – 1:00

Closing Remarks

Senator Wayne Langerholc, Jr.

Senator Andrew Dinniman



Senate Education Committee Hearing
Testimony of
PA Department of Education Secretary Pedro Rivera
May 11, 2020

Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you this morning to discuss continuity of education. I hope that you, your families and your constituents are remaining safe during this challenging time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has called for extraordinary measures and brought unprecedented change to our communities. For school communities, that has included building closures, transitions to distance learning, and the cancellation of traditional year-end activities. The decision to close physical schools was a difficult one, but it was necessary to prioritize the health and safety of our students, staff, and communities.

To students who have lost opportunities to celebrate their accomplishments, from spring concerts and competitions to graduations, I understand your sadness. To caregivers stressed by economic pressures and the challenges of assisting more directly in your student's educational journey, I understand your frustration. To educators working tirelessly to ensure that students and families continue to be served, I appreciate your dedication. As we all work together to prepare students to continue on to postsecondary opportunities, the workforce or to their next grade level, it is our shared responsibility to support and provide students of every age with meaningful educational opportunities.

I recognize that this call to action is more challenging for some communities, schools and families, but it is vital that we work collectively to focus our time, resources and energy on working toward equal learning opportunities for every student in the commonwealth. We are a state rich in diversity and that means no single solution will be effective for all schools. By evaluating local needs and partnering to employ or expand upon available resources, schools are adapting and responding to provide the highest quality education possible for their students under unprecedented conditions.

Our top priority has always been to ensure the health and safety of students. Which is why in the initial days and weeks of the statewide closure, schools, along with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and local partners focused on communicating with families, removing barriers, and providing meals to students.

However, as the situation evolved, and the duration of the closures was extended, the department placed a stronger emphasis on continuity of education efforts. Continuity of education is the overarching term for educational practices that occur during a prolonged disruption to normal school operations. I want to take this moment to thank the General Assembly for underscoring the importance of providing instruction to students during this crisis by including in Act 13 of 2020 the requirement that school entities make a good faith effort to offer continuity of education to students during the school closure.

Pennsylvania's more than 700 public school entities serve over 1.7 million students. Within those school communities there exists great diversity, sometimes even between buildings within a single district. In the earliest days of the school closures, local officials assessed their needs and capacity, as well as that of their students and families, to prepare to pivot to distance learning. To assist in meeting the unique needs of our school communities, in March PDE developed a multi-pronged approach to assist with navigating this new learning environment.

To provide a consistent and equitable foundation for this work, PDE partnered with intermediate units (IUs) and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN) to develop guidance and evidence-based resources around continuity of education, and to provide technical assistance to school leaders. Within the first few weeks of the school closures, the intermediate units had provided direct technical assistance to over 400 school districts and charter schools.

In addition to the aforementioned technical assistance, PDE recognized a need for online learning platforms for many of our schools and districts lacking such programming. The department responded to that need by leveraging funding and scale to provide access to an online learning system at no cost to schools or students. This system includes coursework in English Language Arts, math and many other subjects aligned to Pennsylvania academic standards for students at all grade levels. As evidence of the perceived need, more than 380,000 students are currently subscribed to these courses made available by PDE.

Additionally, the department allocated nearly \$5 million in Continuity of Education Equity Grants (CEEG) to help schools serve an additional 75,000 students who would have otherwise been unable to stay educationally connected during the pandemic. Grants allowed schools to purchase computer equipment, such as laptops, tablets and internet hot spots, as well as instructional materials such as paper lessons and coursework. Schools with the highest percentages of students lacking access to resources received priority funding. During this process PDE determined that the CEEGs only addressed a fraction of the existing need and we have pledged to continue to explore every opportunity to provide additional resources to students, families and schools in need.

Lastly, the department partnered with Pennsylvania's public television stations to provide instructional programming to students through the seven individual Public Broadcasting System (PBS) member stations in the state. Public television reaches over 12.4 million Pennsylvanians serving large diverse, rural and underserved audiences. Free "Learning at Home" resources that

complement the PBS programming are available to families and educators at www.learningathomepa.org.

Each school entity has submitted their continuity of education plans to the department. However, as those plans are dynamic, schools will continue to revise and strengthen them in response to student and staff needs, community input, and emerging trends and guidance. Now that schools are closed for the remainder of the academic year, the expectation is that they are offering planned instruction at all grade levels as part of their continuity of education plans. As Secretary, I know this is not an easy task for students, educators or for our families, but our students must continue their learning to the greatest extent possible throughout the remainder of this year. I want to again commend all of our teachers and caregivers who have worked together in innovative ways to serve our children. This commitment and collaboration have been especially important for meeting the needs of our most vulnerable populations including students with disabilities and English learners.

I recognize that there is no precedent for what we are asking of our schools and it is not an easy task, but it is our collective, moral responsibility to do all we can to ensure equity and opportunity for Pennsylvania's students. I am confident that, together, Pennsylvania educators and communities are doing everything in their power to ensure the provision of meaningful instruction to every student.



**TESTIMONY OF THE
PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON
CONTINUITY OF EDUCATION
NATHAN G. MAINS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

Good morning Chairmen Langerholc, Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to present testimony regarding Pennsylvania public schools' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am Nathan Mains, PSBA's Chief Executive Officer.

The unexpected closure of school buildings due to the COVID-19 pandemic has forced unparalleled challenges upon school boards, administrators, and teachers to continue serving students and families. Our school districts are stretching financial, technical, and instructional resources to bring meals, education, and services to children.

Pandemic amplifies the value and need for support of public schools

As schools were closed and stay-at-home orders spread across the Commonwealth, many families found themselves temporarily without the support and services provided through their local public schools. One of the first challenges faced by families and schools was continuing to provide school meals

to students, many of whom rely on the school for two meals a day. But, public schools stepped up to meet that challenge by providing drive-thru meal pick-ups and using school vehicles to deliver meals. As school closures extended, school leaders confronted the challenge of providing continuity of education.

Continuity of education struggle different for each community

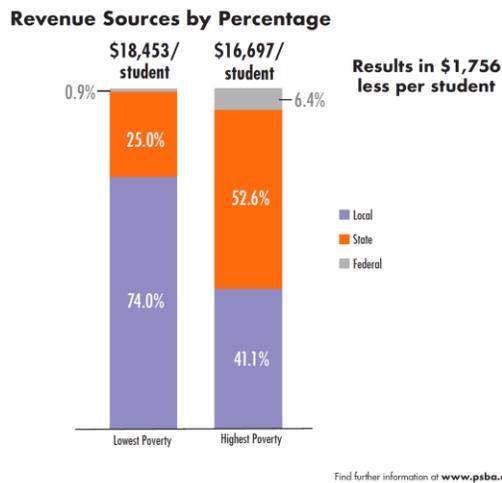
As districts implement their new continuity of education plans, the differences among districts in terms of available funds and resources, including access to technology such as laptops, tablets and Internet services, are starkly apparent.

Transitioning to a new educational model in a matter of weeks has been a herculean task, though the differing level of resources among districts has made that transition easier for some districts than others. All of our school districts have felt the impact of this crisis and have moved forward to provide continuity of education no matter what challenges they have faced. Some of our districts were up and running within days via online platforms and were able to quickly provide students with laptops or other devices and access to Internet, while others have just started full operation of online platforms last week.

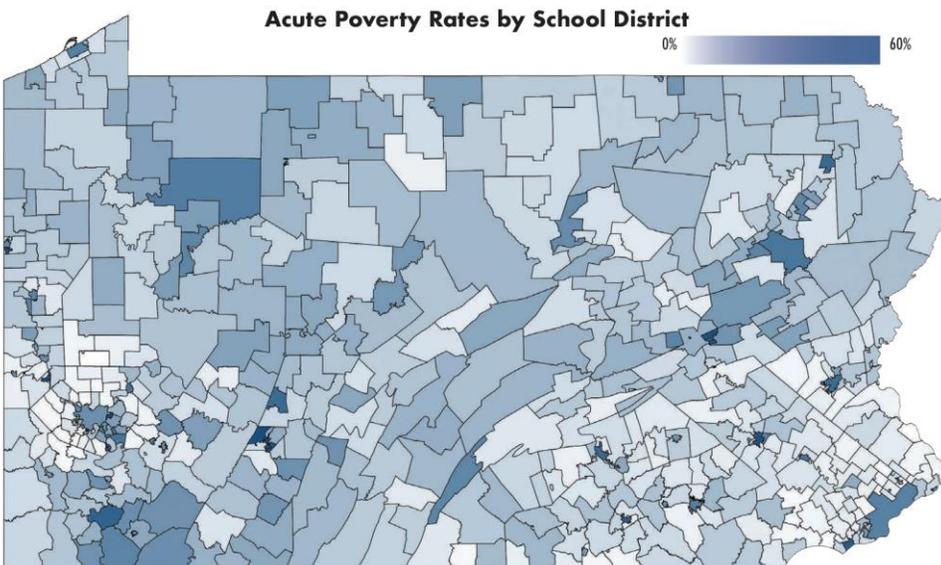
One of the biggest challenges from the start of this crisis was implementing the requirement to provide all students with a Free Appropriate Public Education. The challenge of providing instruction and support services as adequately as possible in this new environment demanded that schools meet head on the needs of all students, regardless of ability, technical resources, English Learner status or other special circumstance. A lack of definitive guidance also spurred intense debates within districts as to how to adequately provide instruction and support services in the best manner possible. Ensuring every student has access and can be provided with the accommodations and supports necessary to succeed has required legal consideration, financial assistance, professional development and communication with parents and families. Districts are making significant changes from the manner in which schools normally deliver instruction and services, such as providing occupational therapy or mental health services through virtual connections.

Another challenge is addressing the lack of access to reliable broadband connectivity such as WiFi and cellular service in the rural parts of the Commonwealth. Quite simply, some families do not have this access nor a way to

obtain it, and even when access is available, it is cost prohibitive for many families. Consequently school districts needed to provide online education to some students, while simultaneously delivering curriculum via paper packets to other students. This causes significant equity concerns since students in the same classes are being taught curriculum in different manners. In general, we have found that those school districts with highest poverty do not have the same level of resources, such as technology, as their lowest poverty peers, due largely to the reduced ability to generate local revenue.



Poverty's impact on continuity of education has been amplified during the crisis – when acute poverty rates are mapped across all 500 school districts, it illustrates that poverty is not just an urban issue. Large stretches of predominantly rural school districts also experience high poverty.



Role of School Boards in Continuity of Education

PSBA's role in assisting districts in moving toward continuity of education comes through our efforts to assist school boards with proper governance during this time. PSBA has offered free Zoom licenses, guides and training to effectively conduct school board meetings online and to ensure compliance with the Sunshine Act. We have offered legal advice to school districts to assist with implementing the provisions of Act 13 of 2020 as well as provided responses to many diverse questions that have all been posted along with numerous resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic on PSBA's website. PSBA has issued updated policy guides and resources to assist boards in addressing virtual board meetings, online learning, federal emergency leave provisions and federal funding. We have also expanded online learning modules, weekly discussion forums and discussion boards to assist school boards in learning from one another.

We will do everything possible to open our schools

There are numerous challenges that lie ahead in order to open schools in time for the 2020-21 school year. Educators and parents are looking to their locally elected school boards, administrators and teachers to ensure our schools have the necessary procedures and tools in place to provide for the health and safety of every student. Now is the time to begin planning for what this readiness will entail.

Among the issues to be considered include the potential staggering of school schedules to reduce the number of students in classrooms and open space gatherings, transportation schedules, enhanced cleaning procedures and equipment for buildings and buses, implementation of additional policies related to PPE, air quality measurements and enhanced filtration, meal preparation and serving procedures, after-school activity precautions to mitigate the potential spread of germs, redesigning of facilities to enhance social distancing, and procedures for student assemblies.

PSBA, along with the PA State Education Association (PSEA), PA Association of School Administrators (PASA), PA Association of School Business Officials (PASBO), PA Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU), PA Principals Association (PPA), PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators (PACTA), and the PA Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS) represent members responsible for the education of more than one million public school students. Our education groups are launching several work groups aimed at mapping a path for

Pennsylvania students to return to classrooms this fall. While the Commonwealth's 500 school districts, 80 CTCs and 29 IUs have done a remarkable job of pivoting to meet students' needs via online and remote resources, everyone is anxious to get students back in their classrooms this fall.

This joint effort by our education associations will begin by launching a series of workgroups comprised of individuals from our respective organizations tasked with evaluating some of the hurdles school districts will face if social distancing practices prohibit large groups from assembling for the start of school or at any point throughout the school year. The workgroups will:

- Provide a set of considerations for school leaders and for policy makers to consider;
- Compile a list of innovative solutions for districts to consider within numerous areas, including operations, scheduling, facilities, academics, transportation and others;
- Identify and increase attention to areas of policy and practice that may require temporary changes in order for districts to be able to open in compliance with state, federal and CDC recommendations; and
- Develop an online repository of resources for policy makers, districts, communities, parents and others to access to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and resources available as schools look to successfully reopen in the fall of 2020.

We are all in this together – #PASchoolsReady

In short, there is significant work to be done by our work groups to help meet the new realities faced in public education in order to protect every single student as well as our community. Impacts such as smaller class sizes and transportation may necessitate two separate schedule shifts each day and will require significant budget investments. The pandemic has changed all our lives and will likely change the ways schools operate moving forward. For the sake of our students and their families' health, our schools will change. Local revenue projections for this fiscal year and next fiscal year are significantly down. As we proceed through this work, we will keep state policymakers informed. Public education will need the support of our leaders to protect our students and to give them the bright future they deserve.

As you are hearing today, the work of public schools has not lessened, and the costs incurred have not decreased. On the contrary, the closure of schools has

brought a lengthy list of challenging dynamics and unexpected expenses in the 2019-20 school year. While the COVID-19 crisis has rapidly changed the financial picture that we knew, school districts need some certainty on matters of funding so they can plan appropriately. That is why school directors from across the state are calling their legislators today and asking for your continued support for public education in a time of great need and difficult decisions. We recognize that the state is facing deep revenue losses and understand that legislators will have to make hard decisions as the state budget nears. With school district budget deadlines also rapidly approaching, school leaders need some certainty from the state on matters of funding so they can plan appropriately.

As key budget discussions occur, PSBA and school leaders ask that the General Assembly support public schools and take these steps to help them control costs:

- *Maintain investments* for public education in the 2020-21 state budget without reductions in basic education, special education and other state subsidies for education.
- Provide savings by *adopting charter school funding reforms* that are predictable, accurate and reflect the actual costs to educate students in regular and special education programs.
- *Provide savings* and flexibility by adopting broad, long-term relief from mandates that consume much of school district budgets. One specific solution that our members are asking for is the permanent reinstatement of a mandate waiver program like the highly successful one which operated in Pennsylvania from 2000 to 2010. PSBA released today an in-depth examination of school district mandates. The new report is posted at www.psba.org and includes a comprehensive listing of mandates, their impact on school district budgets, and the recommendations of a PSBA member task force.

PSBA has been working with legislative staff concerning the continued need to develop flexible legislation to assist schools and would like to extend our gratitude for the important provisions in Act 13 as well as the most recent flexibility allowed in House Bill 360 for federal background checks requiring fingerprinting. 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 you may have.

PA Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing: Continuity of Education Programs Offered by Public Schools During COVID-19
May 11, 2020

Testimony of Ana Meyers
Executive Director
Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools

Good Morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Ana Meyers, I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS). PCPCS is the voice of charter schools in the state, representing both brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools. We advocate for the rights of students, charter operators, educators, and parents. Currently, there are approximately 143,000 students in brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools across Pennsylvania.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown the need for all of us to adapt to changes in many aspects of our lives quickly. Education is one the sectors that has experienced these drastic changes. Pennsylvania's public charter schools have always provided an invaluable option for students whose educational, emotional or safety needs were unable to be met by their assigned school district. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the value and importance of public charter schools even more.

For most schools, the COVID-19 crisis has required a shift from classroom teaching to online instruction. Pennsylvania's public charter schools, both cyber and brick-and-mortar, are doing their part to ensure students receive the instruction they need. As public school officials who have an obligation to ensure our children are learning, as best they can during this crisis, charter leaders and teachers immediately went to work and identified solutions to give students the learning opportunities they needed.

Public charter school teachers work hard, with less resources than school districts, to ensure each student, whether they have special needs or need an accelerated path, receives an education that works for them. Across Pennsylvania, these teachers are doing everything they can to support their students and ensure they are learning during this difficult period. Public charter school teachers are calling students on a regular basis and communicating with parents. They are focused on their students' education as well as their emotional well-being.

PCPCS has many examples of what public charter schools have done throughout the state during this pandemic and I will highlight a few throughout this testimony.

Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools have more than 20 years of experience in educating students online and they currently educate more than 37,000 students with a wide range of educational needs in every county. They understand the logistical and financial challenges of teaching a large number of students online, and have the experience and tools to teach students from all backgrounds and economic statuses. Their knowledge is invaluable for a school struggling with online instruction especially during the COVID-19 health situation, and they have offered multiple times to share this knowledge with their colleagues. This offer includes professional development and consultation to any public school entity.

As public cyber charter schools can attest to, implementing a full scale cyber education model requires extensive planning and preparation regardless of the length of time it may be offered. In addition, providing a high-quality program with a continuation of supports comes with real and meaningful challenges including both logistic and financial considerations. With that in mind, [public cyber charter schools sent a letter to the Department of Education](#), prior to the school closures, offering guidance and assistance to any brick-and-mortar school, public or private, as it adapted its traditional curriculum to virtual learning for its students. This offer has also been [made multiple times](#) on our social media channels to school districts, brick-and-mortar charter schools and private schools directly.

As a result, recently, school counselors from PA Distance Learning Charter School held a teleconference with their colleagues from across Pennsylvania to discuss distance school counseling. They shared best practices, strategies and tools with their colleagues. For many counselors at brick-and-mortar schools, meeting students online rather than face-to-face is a new experience. Public cyber charter schools have also held webinars for teachers on using virtual tools for instruction. PCPCS has been able to successfully connect public cyber charter schools with several brick-and-mortar schools during this pandemic, including schools in Maryland, a state where public cyber charter schools do not exist yet.

Given the nature their educational model, PA's 14 public cyber charter schools were immediately able to offer a high-quality continuity of education consistent with the expectations of their students and families. For the public cyber charter school students in Pennsylvania, very little has changed as a result of the Governor's school closure announcement on March 13th.

Here are just a few examples of what public cyber charter schools are currently doing to provide continuity of education in Pennsylvania:

- At the time of the closure, [PA Cyber Charter School](#) was currently serving over 2,600 students with special needs. PA Cyber has been able to implement plans to continue to remain in compliance of each special education student's IEP by providing a continuum of special education services and programming, related services, and other supplemental programs and services. They are continuing to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services. All special education teachers are providing distance instruction virtually through PA Cyber's online learning platform, recorded videos, and/or other

modes to students with special needs, as well as resource room opportunities in order to meet the specific needs of all students. Current placements in the general classroom include: regular education classroom (least restrictive); co-taught classroom with supplementary instruction and services; regular or co-taught classroom with resource room (academics); and regular or co-taught classroom with resource room (social skills/behavior). Current placements in the separate classroom include learning support, life skills support and autism support. Students with special needs continue to have the opportunity to engage in online tutoring, teacher office hours, as well as supplemental programs and services that are provided at special education department and school-wide levels. The special education department continues to provide related services to all students. Some students were previously receiving these services in a face-to-face environment. During the week of March 16, these face-to-face services were all migrated to virtual/teletherapy services. All students either had or were provided with the appropriate technology in order to implement these services. Services that are currently being provided virtually include: occupational therapy; speech and language therapy; psychological service; tutoring; social skills; counseling; transition/vocational services; and behavior services. PA Cyber has continued to meet all federal and state mandated special education timelines and has continued to follow all typical practices and processes in order to ensure parents and/or guardians are active participants in IEP meetings and have the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

- [PA Virtual Charter School](#), which supports approximately 2,300 students across Pennsylvania, continued to provide a continuity of education including consistent special education supports just as they had prior to March 13th. In anticipation of the COVID-19 health crisis and prior to the Governor's order to close schools, PA Virtual's special education staff and service providers partnered with parents and prepared to offer in-person therapies through an online model. This enabled PA Virtual to have a seamless transition when the Governor's order took effect. Of the 81 students who received in-person services that needed to be switched to online, only 3 parents chose to not have the services provided online or based on the service, it could not be provided online. Those services will be rescheduled when the Governor's order is lifted. For students whose families chose to enroll with PA Virtual after March 13th, all of their services are provided online, consistent with their Individualized Education Plans.
- In addition, the Directors of Special Education of the cyber charter schools meet weekly via Zoom to discuss ongoing concerns related to the COVID-19 health crisis and to determine best practices for supporting their special education students. Further, a Special Education Advisor with the PA Department of Education frequently attends those Zoom meetings to provide guidance and support.
- At [PA Distance Learning Charter School](#), early internet reimbursements have been issued to families to ensure all students remain connected despite any financial hardships as a result of the pandemic.

Throughout the current health crisis, Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools continue to lead the way in providing a consistent and high-quality continuity of education, while simultaneously

providing support and guidance to brick-and-mortar schools throughout the country eager to adopt the cyber education model. The pandemic has clearly shown there is a big difference between offering a comprehensive, online education program for thousands of students and offering a limited, blended learning program for a select few.

Just like school districts, brick-and-mortar public charter schools have had to transform their classrooms to accommodate virtual learning in response to the pandemic. Here are a few examples of what brick-and-mortar public charter schools have done to quickly adapt to the demands placed on them by the pandemic:

- In Philadelphia, the majority of brick-and-mortar charter schools are in underserved areas and have become an integral part of their communities. Their students and families rely on their schools and teachers for much more than education. The schools have partnered with the Mayor's Office and the School District to serve as food distribution sites, serving more than 400,000 meals. They too have fought the digital divide experienced by disadvantaged students and have supplied more than 15,000 computers to their students.
 - In the months since schools closed, [Mastery Charter School Network](#) distributed over 500,000 meals in under 30 days and has provided thousands of families with a place to go for meals, information and reassurance. A tractor trailer of printed learning materials was sent to all 14,000 students. All students are contacted by their teachers, social workers and other school leaders on a weekly basis. Mastery worked with Comcast and other Philadelphia public charter schools to make sure that all families could access free internet through the end of the school year. Mastery also created a 10,000 laptop lending library to provide every student in grades 3-12 with a device for home use. Mastery has moved to an online academic model similar to regular school where students are getting graded.
 - [Freire Charter School](#) purchased and shipped laptops to all of their 2,000 students in the past month, and contracted and paid for internet service for their families that needed it. They successfully moved their mental health program and one-on-one program online. As of May 5, Freire was able to return to full instruction via distance learning. Prior to that, they were working with their students to end the third quarter allowing them to make up any of their work. Freire has created an online after school program that is quite robust as well!
- In Pittsburgh, when [Propel Schools](#) received the news that school buildings would be closed due to COVID-19, they immediately asked themselves “What is most important and immediate for our scholars right now?” The answer was that they wanted to be sure that their scholars and their families had their intersectional needs met, that their scholars knew that Propel cared about them, and was ready to support them and that Propel kept the sense of continuity and community that we all value. Although Propel, like many other schools, encountered logistical challenges, they used them as an opportunity to think outside the box, grow their creativity and model courage, care and community for their scholars. The Propel team hit the ground running:
 - Propel immediately partnered with a local food bank organization to provide grab-and-go lunches for their scholars.

- Their talented academic team immediately mobilized to create a website with a virtual backpack of activities for all grade levels to use while their Google Classrooms were being carefully built.
 - They used their unique framework of professional development to train educators to successfully move to a virtual platform of learning.
 - The wellness team reached out individually to all families to check in with them and ascertain if they could be of assistance. Their Wellness Center team collaborated with community providers to keep their free store running, and also to provide fresh produce and other fresh products to the school families and community members.
 - The technology team immediately began gathering technology from their school buildings and preparing them for their scholars' home use. Propel has sourced distributed 2,500 laptops.
 - The school teams assured authentic connections via new and engaging virtual "School and Community Council" meetings as well as a parents only virtual coffee hour for conversation and community.
- [Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship](#), also located in the Pittsburgh region, began planning for the pandemic when they received notice of the coronavirus on February 5 from the Department of Health. Their staff and families have embraced the challenge and rose to the occasion. By February 28, they had gathered enough information, implemented a pandemic illness policy, temporary telework policy, sent correspondence to their families and created a coronavirus resource webpage. Through this page, they were sending letters home with updates and next steps. The staff immersed themselves in meetings and dialogue surrounding worse case scenarios and began to plan for the future (now referred to as the NEW NORMAL). Fortunately, back in 2016, Penn Hills Charter implemented a 1-to-1 technology initiative which gave them the ability to supply every student with a Chromebook. All staff engaged in developing a student contact log (which included detailed information regarding students in need - homeless, foster care, families living in poverty - IEP, students who normally struggled with attendance and submitting assignments) to create teams who were responsible for contacting EVERY SINGLE FAMILY before March 18 when their alternative instruction began. Every week, staff meet virtually to review the notes in the log to ensure all students and families are engaged.
- [Bear Creek Community Charter School](#), located in Wilkes-Barre, anticipated potential school closures prior to Governor Wolf's order, so they quickly developed a one-week contingency plan for the week of March 16-20 to buy them some time. They conducted a parent technology survey two weeks prior, so they knew most of the students who were going to have challenges accessing technology at home. On the last day of school, they had students take iPads home as well as their interactive notebooks for Math and ELA, along with a summary sheet for each student identifying the logins and passwords for their online textbooks. They implemented review and enrichment that first week, which allowed them time to put in a structured plan for teachers and students going forward. Their formal plan started March 23rd, with each classroom teacher conducting an online lesson via Zoom or Goggle Classroom (grade dependent) on Mondays. Teachers

recorded the lessons and added them to their teacher webpages for parents and students to review. Students were assigned work for the remainder of the week, using their interactive notebooks, iReady software, or their online textbooks. Teachers held “office hours” on Fridays to collect work and answer questions from students and parents. They worked with Service Electric Cable, a local cable provider, to provide parents with free internet through June 30th and they continue to communicate formally, school-wide with parents every other week via a hard-copy letter via mail, MailChimp, website and Facebook. This is in addition to the weekly office hours for each teacher. The speech, OT and PT staff have been conducting “tele-therapy” sessions with specific students. They have been able to conduct all their IEP meetings via Zoom with formal paperwork via mail, and their counselor and psychologist are holding sessions via telephone or Zoom. Bear Creek’s school nurse has a roster of 24 kids she calls weekly just to check in. Finally, they have a very active Facebook page. The “specialist teachers” post optional activities weekly, and the paraprofessionals have been hosting daily activities to keep kids engaged, like guest readers, spirit days, etc.

- In Altoona, [HOPE for Hyndman Charter School](#), in an effort to make sure seniors don't miss out on all the things leading up to graduation, delivered their senior banquet to them. They called it a “Banquet In A Box” and the meal included enough food for them to enjoy with their families. They are also continuing to serve “to go” meals to students in the area, free of charge. The meals are served on Mondays and each student, 18 and under, receives five breakfast items, three hot lunches and two bagged lunches. This past week, they served 130 students for a total of 1,300 meals. They also handed out snack bags and family bags containing items like eggs, watermelons, blackberries and coleslaw.

Looking into the upcoming school year, it is all going to come down to what guidelines Governor Wolf and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) issue. However, in order to be as prepared as possible, public charter schools across the state are already preparing in the event distance learning is required again this Fall with adjusted schedules or staggered learning environments. Public cyber charter schools will continue to operate almost as normally with the exceptions of in-person activities. Public cyber charter schools will also have the capacity for more students if necessary.

If schools do reopen in the Fall, they might look very different from before, as officials consider imposing safeguards, such as requiring face masks. We are trying to do the best we can to map out potential scenarios that might develop and charter schools will be ready for anything. We do hope that guidance comes from PDE sooner rather than later so that we can be as prepared as possible on our end. Anything that the General Assembly can do to encourage Governor Wolf and PDE to communicate their plan for schools as soon as possible would be ideal.

Though COVID-19 has been the priority of the General Assembly over the past few months, we know that discussions around the 2020-21 budget will begin soon. As you discuss future public education funding, we ask that you consider the value offered by public charter schools and why thousands of families in Pennsylvania chose a public charter school as the best educational opportunity for their children. Though Act 13 of 2020 froze funding levels for all schools, which

unfortunately means that charter schools have not been receiving tuition reimbursement for the new students they have been educating since March 13, we understood that you took this action to create financial stability during this crisis. Unfortunately, the Wolf Administration changed the rules and left Pennsylvania's public charter schools in a difficult and uncertain position. Shortly after Act 13 became law, Secretary Rivera posted new guidance on the PDE's website **requiring** all schools to enroll students regardless of their ability to financially provide for their education. While this most likely has not impacted school districts (because very few families are moving at this time), it puts Pennsylvania's public charter schools, both brick-and-mortar and cyber, in a bind as they have seen a surge in enrollment during the closure. We do not believe that requiring schools to educate students without the resources to pay for technology, curriculum materials, and funding to compensate educators was the intention of the General Assembly and we ask that going into the Fall this issue is addressed.

While the relationship between school districts and public charter schools has been contentious at times, the public charter school community wants to put politics aside and work with our counterparts to do what's best for students in Pennsylvania. Everyone needs to do their part to get through the current COVID-19 threat, and Pennsylvania's public charter schools want to be part of that solution.

PA's public charter schools will continue to do their part to identify solutions and the 143,000 students they serve will continue to be educated by the schools they have chosen to attend.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the committee for holding this hearing today. I urge all legislators to seek out public charter school students and families in their districts, to hear their stories, and empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

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**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Continuity of Education**

**Presented to the
Senate Education Committee
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**By
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President, Pennsylvania State Education Association**

Testimony

Good morning/afternoon Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Rich Askey, President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association. Thank you for inviting PSEA to participate in this hearing and on this panel today.

Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of a scale none of us has ever experienced. Navigating the constantly shifting and daunting impacts of a disease we don't fully understand and for which treatment is not yet fully within our grasp, requires an unprecedented level of grace, resilience, and – most of all – an unwavering commitment to protect the health, safety, and economic needs of all Pennsylvanians.

PSEA is truly grateful to the General Assembly for demonstrating such commitment through the swift adoption of Act 13 in March. That action has kept our public education system functioning and even thriving in some locations since our schools physically closed two months ago. I would also like to personally thank you, Chairman Langerholc, for recognizing the graduating seniors in your school districts who have missed so many special moments this year. That was a truly thoughtful act on your part.

I would also like to take a moment and publicly recognize my fellow testifiers- Secretary Rivera and our education partners – I know how hard you all have worked on behalf of Pennsylvania's students. Thank you – your efforts do not go unnoticed.

As an educator for over 30 years in the Harrisburg School District, I am no stranger to challenging circumstances. But this is unlike anything I have ever experienced. The realities of the past two months have tested each of us to the extreme. Yet even under these extreme circumstances, one constant remains - educators are committed to providing students with the support and resources they need.

I can personally attest to the **amazing** acts by public educators across the Commonwealth that remind us just how critical our school system is for the good of all Pennsylvanians. We have seen and heard first-hand from parents, students, and others all across PA that our school system is essential to our communities and it plays an integral role in the lives of so many.

As the President of PSEA, I have received hundreds of emails and phone calls from members in every region of the state sharing their stories of exciting successes and innovations happening in their districts – but also of the significant challenges and barriers for connecting with and supporting our students who need it the most.

For me, I have always found that I can only gain the most understanding about what is really going on “on the ground” when I hear it directly from those on the front lines. Which is why when asked to participate in this hearing, PSEA went directly to the experts – our members – and asked them to share in more detail what is happening. We compiled and summarized the responses and included them in the written testimony provided to the Committee prior to this hearing. We respectfully request you read through the feedback from our members – it is raw, honest, and insightful.

But in addition to sharing the written feedback, I’d like to take a moment this morning and share just a couple of stories from educators that I believe capture both the challenges and successes of the efforts happening to ensure students continue to learn.

The first story is from Nancy, an educator in the Greater Johnstown School District.

- According to a recent survey conducted by the district, nearly half of the students in Johnstown lack internet access or a device to connect to the internet. Online education would be impossible in those circumstances, so Nancy has relied on instructional packets. However, getting that material to students who are chronically, episodically or transitionally homeless is extremely difficult. And those are the very students Nancy has tried the hardest to reach.

- In her own words, Nancy said:

*“Some students lack school supplies, food and some even shelter. I and other teachers have made home deliveries of supplies, created inventive ways to be in communication with them and sought business and industry partners to help us help our students. Our students are also now left in a home that may not be safe for them or be able to provide life sustaining needs for them. Our teachers, spending hours daily with our children, many times are the only constant some children have. **Our students need us, and we need them.**”*

The second story is from Dave, an elementary school teacher in the West Shore School District.

- Dave’s students do not have district-issued tablets, so he is educating them through a mix of online education, email, zoom sessions as well as physical packets (as Nancy had to do in Greater Johnstown).
- Dave does everything he can to make it work and meet his students needs where they are – but this patchwork method, while necessary, makes it much harder to prevent some students from falling through the cracks.
- He has said that the number one issue he faces is the lack of internet access for many families—a problem we see across the commonwealth.
- Dave goes the extra mile – literally - to help prevent that though. If a student stops interacting, he drives to their home, bringing a basket of food just in case they need it, drops off materials, and hopefully gets a quick look at them from a distance to make sure they are faring well.
- Dave is bringing weekend “powerpacks” of food to 25% of his students right now and is regularly making wellness checks with his school’s counselor.

- Dave knows how integral the public-school system is to his students' physical, mental, and emotional health and that he may be the only caring adult in some of these student's lives.

That knowledge comes with a heavy toll, and a heavy burden—one that many educators in addition to Dave and Nancy are feeling right now. The very kids who need us the most right now are the hardest to reach in this environment. We are worried about our students. We are worried about them all the time. Its not something we turn off at night when we lay our heads down. There are very real social, emotional and mental impacts on students and educators from this crisis – and it is important we all recognize the affects that will have now and into the future as we approach planning for what education will look like for the 2020-2021 school year. Those impacts are not limited to the more extreme examples I have just shared, however. There are challenges faced by teachers and students in places that have high parental involvement, quality access to the internet and a higher level of financial resources as well.

Stephanie is a teacher in the Abington School District.

- She is also a mom of two young children.
- She teaches all day and tries her best to balance homeschooling her kids at the same time (in addition to all of the other responsibilities).
- Often both sets of kids—her students and her children, need her at the same time.
- She's also working hard to make distance learning engaging, learning skills to teach online and lesson planning deep into the night. Stephanie estimates her workday has nearly doubled.
- Despite the personal toll this schedule has taken on her, Stephanie was focused mostly on her students—especially those with special needs or who speak English as a second language—who she said are desperately missing the in-person services schools provide them.
- While her students are mostly engaged, she likened this moment to being more akin to crisis management than to teaching. And I think there is some truth to that statement.

I'm proud of how our schools and educators have responded during this crisis. I'm proud that PSEA has developed programs to help our members learn online teaching skills, that we have invested in online self-care seminars to support their mental and emotional needs. And, I'm proud of the thousands of dollars we have donated to local food banks—a service we know the families of our students are relying on. But I also know we are only in the first phase of this crisis. Moving forward will require significant commitment and resources to ensure students and educators receive the supports they need to provide continuity of education and a sense of community in whatever form that may have to take.

In addition, for schools to physically open safely it **will** require social distancing, greater sanitization of classrooms, buildings and buses and more health professionals in our schools, like nurses, counselors and school social workers. There is a lot we still don't know about this disease. But we DO know that opening schools without a comprehensive plan – which includes feedback by those of us on the front lines like the members this panel represents - will likely cause a new spike in COVID-19 cases, forcing some – if not all – schools to be closed once more. None of us want that.

Albert Einstein once said, “In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity”. We are no doubt in a crisis – perhaps the biggest of our lives. But I truly believe there could be great opportunity ahead if we continue to partner together with a focus on providing all students the supports and learning opportunities they deserve.

Thank you for having me here today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Our Stories and Policy Recommendations

The realities of the past two months have tested each of us to the extreme. Yet even under these extreme circumstances, one constant remains - *educators are committed to providing students with the support and resources they need to succeed.*

Since March 13 when schools were physically closed, I have received hundreds of emails and phone calls from members in every region of the state sharing their stories and insights. They have shared hopeful messages of exciting successes, creative instruction, innovations, and educational solutions happening in their districts. And they have also shared their worries and their fears – for their students, their families, and for themselves. Even our members in school districts with the most ideal of circumstances – widely available broadband, technological devices, strong leadership, supports and processes in place – face significant challenges and barriers for connecting with the students who need it the most. And for those school districts that were already struggling due to insufficient resources – this pandemic has only exacerbated and further magnified that growing inequity.

PSEA truly appreciates the time our members have taken to share with us their raw, honest, and insightful observations during this time of upheaval in all our lives. Hearing directly from the experts on the front lines of this new educational reality during a time of crisis is essential to be truly informed. That is why we have compiled a sampling of this feedback and attached it to this testimony. We hope their observations and insights help guide you and your fellow policymakers as you continue to support the continuity of education for Pennsylvania’s students – now and into the future.

This experience, this disruption of our daily lives, has been traumatic for kids and adults alike – but I’m proud of how our schools and educators have responded during this crisis. I’m proud of PSEA’s development of programs to help members learn and enhance their online teaching skills, and that we have invested in online self-care seminars to support their mental and emotional needs. And I’m proud of the ongoing, diligent efforts of our statewide organizational

partners across the state as we collectively navigate this crisis with a singular focus on providing stability and essential supports to students, families, and communities across Pennsylvania.

But I also know we are only in the first phase of this crisis. Moving forward will require *even more* commitment, engagement, planning, and resources to ensure educators have what they need to provide continuity of education for students during the duration of this pandemic.

Albert Einstein once said, “In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity”. We are no doubt in a crisis – perhaps the biggest of our lives. But there is also opportunity. Some may see this crisis as an “opportunity” to continue to dismantle the essential fabric of our public schools and public education in Pennsylvania. But that would not be opportunity – that would be a tragedy. This crisis has reminded each of us just how essential our public schools are for community and connection - and just how essential community and connection are for our survival. PSEA stands ready to partner with you to navigate this crisis in a way that truly creates opportunity – for students, for their families, and for our communities across PA.

PSEA POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: CONTINUITY OF EDUCATION

- 1) **Ensure PA schools have the tools they need to re-open safely next year.** Each of us shares a commitment to safely re-opening our schools next year and providing critical supports to students in this next phase of recovery. *This goal, however, cannot be reached if state funding for schools is reduced and the ability of school districts to manage their local budget is removed.* PSEA fully acknowledges that the financial impact of this disease will be far-reaching, and tough choices will likely need to be made. But for schools to physically open safely, it will require social distancing; greater sanitization of classrooms, buildings, and buses; certified school nurses to assess student symptoms and evaluate illnesses; counselors to help kids cope with uncertainty and trauma; and enough classroom educators to avoid overcrowding. Inflicting budget cuts will only make our schools more overcrowded, less safe, and lacking in the professional staff we need to survive and recover from this pandemic.

- 2) **Advocate for \$200 Billion in Federal Education Stabilization Funds.** Providing continuity of education cannot be provided if school districts and schools are forced to reduce essential programs and furlough thousands of classroom teachers, school nurses, psychologists, counselors and social workers, reading specialists, and instructional paraprofessionals as well as education support professionals who keep our students – and our school facilities – healthy, clean, and safe. It is therefore imperative that *Congress provide significant stimulus funding for state and local governments and at least \$200 billion in education stabilization funds to ensure continuity of education* and educational opportunities for all students. PSEA urges the members of this Committee to join us in our efforts to lobby the PA Congressional delegation for another COVID-19 stimulus package that contains the necessary and essential federal funding focused on protecting students.

- 3) **Address Pennsylvania’s “digital divide”.** Up to 12 million children nationwide live in homes without a broadband connection or modern online devices. Even in communities and homes with access, it is often still insufficient to meet the increased demand. And while there is no single solution or quick fix, Pennsylvania can no longer defer investing in the state’s broadband infrastructure. *PSEA urges PA lawmakers to 1) establish a clear process for broadband funding and infrastructure development with a prioritized focus on the communities most in need; and 2) lobby Congress to provide a minimum of \$2 billion in emergency funding for the E-Rate program, an already proven program that enables schools and libraries to connect kids at home and ensure they have a tablet or other modern device to do their schoolwork.*

- 4) **Support a comprehensive approach for planning and preparation for returning to school.** When students return to school next fall, they will need additional and unique supports to address academic and social-emotional needs. The re-entry and recovery from this crisis will be a long process, and there won’t be a one-size-fits all approach. But to ensure plans for reopening schools are rooted in a focus on student success and safety, the planning must begin now and must be informed by those educators working most closely with students on a daily basis.

5) **Provide essential social and emotional supports for students and for school personnel.**

There are very real social, emotional and mental impacts on students and educators from this crisis – and it is important we all recognize the affects that will have now and into the future as we approach planning for what education will look like in the for the 2020-2021 school year.

All students need supportive relationships and nurturing learning environments – but students facing additional stress or trauma need it most. The COVID-19 crisis will only exacerbate underlying conditions many of our students already live with – depression and anxiety – and some will feel elevated levels of isolation and trauma due to the death of loved ones, and the economic hardships hitting their families. The need for certified school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses has never been more acute.

Educators are also facing challenges like they have never known before. Signs and manifestations of anxiety, depression, and trauma in students had already been on the rise prior to the pandemic and have only been worsened by the health, economic, and social realities facing them and their families. At the same time, educators are dealing with ongoing challenges in their own personal lives - managing their work assignments and learning new techniques for delivering instruction, while at the same time caring for their own children and possibly facing new economic and health hardships due to COVID-19. Educator burnout is very real – and the need for self-care and supports from the education system could not be more urgent. we urge all policymakers to recognize that our educators must have the supports they need to be healthy and balanced in order to support students during and after this crisis.

**FEEDBACK FROM PSEA MEMBERS:
EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

I truly feel like [my district] is being amazing with assisting both teachers and students. They have tweaked the workload to help students and we have a high rate of active e-learners. It is a killer for the artistic side of school because we cannot grow as artist and performers via zoom or google classroom posts and while students are actively engaging, the arts require feedback and a lot of it can't be given without being side-by-side with students.

Emotionally the arts allow kiddos to connect and express themselves in so many ways, but we can't connect to produce the next level over the internet. That is devastating for students and teachers alike. Kids are emotionally struggling - especially the ones from unsupported families and that is heartbreaking.

Catherine, Dauphin County

I find it hard to balance teaching and my own family. My two children have about 2 to 3 hours of online instruction daily Monday - Friday. They have zoom meetings with their teachers, while I have online meetings and training that often overlap.

I worry about my special education students. They need additional supports that I don't think are best served to them even in live online sessions. Many times the online group sessions are glitchy and spotty with WiFi connections, which makes it very hard for everyone in the session to follow along and understand what is being discussed. Overall there are many distractions.

*Many students have parents that are still going to work, and they are not encouraging their students to complete assignments. **Mental health is already taking a toll on many of my students. I have had over a dozen parents out of 80 that have mentioned that they personally are struggling, their child is struggling, or their whole family is having trouble coping.***

We are fortunate that both the district I work in and the district my children attend have been able to provide families with Chromebooks. Even with that, having multiple people on devices at the same time, connection is not always reliable even with good service plans.

Colleen, Bucks County

Some aspects of remote learning are working, but most are not. I teach seniors in a district with high poverty. My engagement with students is around 65-70 percent. Many seniors have just "checked out" believing the school year is over. My colleagues and I agree that the current set up takes all the joy out of school and just leaves the drudgery. I have a handful of kids who are working better than they were before the shutdown. I have some who are at about the same level.

And I have a lot who have lots of technology questions, even though we used Google classroom extensively through the school year. Plus, in our district, around 15% of students still don't have

a device. We were able to get some technology grants, but the equipment is slow getting to us. We only have about four weeks left and we are still waiting on devices.

Our district still hasn't decided how to grade the last report period... Our district is looking to balance compassion with accountability, since we know we have many students who are struggling with family, economic and mental health issues.

We were given minimal training on how to engage students online. The training some teachers received was on how to use Google classroom which many of us already knew how to do. The training we need is how to truly engage our kids.

This crisis has highlighted yet again the vast disparity in Pennsylvania schools. Some schools didn't skip a beat, beginning online on March 16 – compared to our situation that I just described. And I'm well aware that we are probably not the worst situation in the state.

PSEA Member, Allegheny County

Remote learning is not working. My district is a high poverty district. A phone survey to families resulted in 42% of families not having a device or connection for distance learning. This created the need to develop paper packets, then the need for collection and accountability. Many families are homeless and will not receive the packets or any chance at education. The divide will grow and the poorest students that need education the most to help them rise from poverty will be left behind even further. Our students lack school supplies, food and some even shelter. I and other teachers have made home deliveries of supplies, created inventive ways to be in communication with our students and sought business and industry partners to help us help our students. We are working harder - not smarter. We have full plates.

It is difficult to watch this happen, to not be able to be face-to-face with the students in the learning environment that we normally provide; one that is safe and effective. It is frustrating to sit in front of a screen and see that nearly 50% of the students have not checked in. We are truly building the plane in the air while we desperately try to keep each child grounded. It is disappointing to see less of a return on our investment. Our investment which has grown with last minute webinars, hours of trial and error, presentations and collaborative learning to be able to get the virtual classrooms up and running.

*I wish all families that have the means honestly put forth the effort to join in and take advantage of what we are trying to do for them. Parents are seeing what great work we do in the classroom, despite the interruptions, varied capabilities and abilities our students have. They are becoming frustrated in adapting to parenting and teaching. **But the human component is missing in our distance education. This is very important to students in lower socioeconomic conditions and is vital to their success.***

Our students are also now left in a home that may not be safe for them or be able to provide life sustaining needs for them. Our teachers, spending hours daily with our children, many times are the only constant some children have. Our students need us, and we need them.

Nancy, Cambria County

Remote/distance learning is working as a review, but it does not replace working in the classroom with the students...we can't replace the small group and social interaction with their classmates. Many of my students do not have internet as it is an expense to some families. Most families are using a parent's cell phone for online things. Our school sends worksheet packets home. My parents like that, because they feel comfortable with it, can sit and watch their child. Our principal took care to listen to parents and teachers. My parents just wish their children were in school to have complete days of instruction.

Tricia, Mercer County

On March 13, I told my kindergartners that we would have two more wonderful weeks left [before I transition to a new job]. I told them that they are going to love their new teacher and on March 27 I would bring cupcakes for an "old lady birthday/good-bye party." I hugged each one getting on the bus and told them, "Don't forget your leprechaun trap on Monday!" Then, I walked into my building and got the text - the Governor was shutting down schools for two weeks. I had just taught my last day and didn't know it.

During the emergency staff meeting about COVID-19, I got to tell my colleagues, "Thanks for everything – after 23 years of teaching here and 10 years as union president - goodbye". So much for long goodbyes. That weekend, I cried for the goodbye that was stolen from my students and me. In the weeks that have followed, my living room is my "office". I'm learning my new job remotely. I'm hoping I'm doing everything I'm supposed to be doing. Everyone is kind and patient as I learn via phone calls, Zoom meetings, manuals and e-mails. I check in on my kindergartners with a story on Dojo and mail them books and pen pal letters and encourage them to do the on-line materials and packets my team is using to keep them learning.

As I write this, my younger son is upstairs completing his senior year of high school on the computer. For days on end, I forced a smile telling him, "the positive is we are all healthy. We are all experiencing this crazy time together." But the trite comments don't bring back the cancelled track season, the cancelled travel soccer season, the cancelled National Academic games in Atlanta. Debates, plays, prom...cancelled. Graduation...TBD. Family vacation...on hold. Orientation for YSU...going to be done on-line. Picking out a roommate...done on-line with an asterisk...no promise school will start in August. He's a positive kid, but how much can you smile when everything keeps getting cancelled?

But blessedly, while we may cry in frustration and disappointment...we aren't crying tears of mourning a loved one. We are all in this together.

Shawnee, Mercer County

Remote learning is working to an extent, but it is not working for all students. The hardest impact is on my students with autism. They are not in their usual routine and are missing the time being in social situations. Some of my students' parents are very busy with work and are not able to make sure their children are getting online to complete any work. It is also very difficult to Zoom with students when they are so easily distracted by everything in their home environment.

I feel the students in my district have the supplies they need, but I do feel badly because they often need more support and encouragement at home. I also feel badly for the parents who are working and doing everything that they are capable of to help their children.

My administration has weekly meetings to keep us up to date with the latest. I feel they are doing the best that they can.

Sara, Bedford County

Distance learning is going well. Kids are missing school like crazy. While they get on the calls they struggle because they just want to be together. I've been on a roller coaster, but I am good now and we are going with "less is more" so the stress level isn't so high. I think [my district] has the best support during all of this.

Kids are really struggling emotionally. I had kids share on one of our zoom meetings that they were with friends this weekend. Another student then said to me "it's hard when some people listen, and other people don't."

Nicole, York County

I am now into somewhat of a rhythm that works for me but I wouldn't want to do this [distance learning] all the time. It's extremely exhausting and I'm working more now than I did in the brick and mortar classroom. Time is irrelevant because I have parents contacting me for help at all hours of the day and night. I only have 13/24 students who come on to my Zoom meetings. The other students have parents who are working essential jobs, limited or no internet access, or no support at home. The kids who need the help the most just aren't getting it despite my many attempts at making contact.

I have taught myself the programs I need to work on and relied on other educators I work with or on Facebook groups. The school district is feeling their way through this and so I feel like we've been on our own. I feel tired and rundown.

A large percentage of my students don't have internet access or reliable internet. Some students are working solely on packets because of this. Some kids don't have any device but their parent's cell phone. You can't do "school" on that. It's been tough because I'm an Apple user so if a parent has a different device, I have to look up how to help them. Kids don't have the math manipulatives they need to be able to complete lessons (like base 10 blocks) so I've had to improvise.

*Families have been extremely supportive and I've really enjoyed working more closely with my families than I ever had the opportunity to do before. Principals have been supportive because I am my local president and have tried to bridge a good relationship through this all with them. My super has been as well. **It's been a step by step, day by day, week by week process to get through and we've all had to work closer together than ever before.***

Missy, Greene County

Remote learning has been a challenge. I teach Digital Media - I already use Google Classroom so when we went online-only, my classes were already set up and my students already knew how to login and turn in assignments. Many of my colleagues had to start from scratch.

The biggest challenge is internet access and device availability. All my students have some form of internet access but not all of them have high speed internet. This has made remote instruction extremely difficult. Some are accessing content with cell phones or Chromebooks provided to them from their home schools. With adequate internet access and a high-powered device my program could theoretically be taught 100% online if need be for a certain period of time, but there is no way that could happen without a substantial investment in rural broadband internet.

I'm overwhelmed. I feel like I'm always working bouncing back and forth between the needs of my own children and their education and my students. Days and time have lost all meaning, I work just as much on the weekends now and respond to students at all times of the day. Thankfully our administration has been very supportive during this time.

Lauren, Clearfield County

I am completely in agreement with the necessity of distance learning at this time, but it is not working for me and my students. Our students are totally checked out. Students are coming to meetings and completing assignments, but they are not really communicating with us. Most of them turn their cameras off during the meetings. We have lost personal connections with students.

We need some training on how to keep these students engaged during class time. I think we need to think out of the box and start using different platforms focused on engagement

*I feel frustrated, sad, and not effective. Even though I am working hard to create engaging activities, it feels like I am going through the motions and so are the students. **It's like I have set a beautiful table with fine linens, the family china, and good silver. I put some fast food on the plates and the students sit down and pretend to eat it.***

Rebecca, Cumberland County

I have found it a challenge to teach in the virtual platform. I have always availed myself to my students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. With this environment, that is even more the case. Here is an example of what I mean:

One of the 3 classes I teach is organic chemistry. I hold virtual meetings every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The students have been working on their most recent assignment: choosing reaction conditions necessary to be able to convert the substrate shown into that particular product. (We are discussing E1, E2, SN1, SN2 reactions). This assignment is due this morning. Last night at 9 pm I received an email from a student asking me to upload a video on successful strategies to help with the assignment. Using screencastify, I prepared a video and it wasn't until 10:30 that it finally uploaded (we live where cable internet is not available) allowing me to share the video.

My wife teaches French and she is on the computer preparing virtual lessons or evaluating student work, and I am not exaggerating, 14 hours a day. She is trying to prepare kids for the AP exam and doesn't want to let the kids down!

I think what many have found out through this process is that for kids serious about learning the content, this is not a substitute for actual in class instruction. We are all putting in the extra time to give the kids the quality education that they all deserve, but virtual learning is not as effective as in-class instruction.

Tom, Westmoreland County

*These last few months have been very challenging to say the least. Teaching remotely isn't easy and I truly miss my students. It's not only difficult for educators, but for our students and parents as well. **One of the biggest challenges I face in rural Pennsylvania is the lack of devices and internet for many of our families.** Even though our district did lend out devices to families that needed them, they are also dealing with internet issues. Some of our families live in locations that just simply don't offer internet services.*

There's also the challenge of families that do have the resources, but not the time. Many people are essential workers and when they get home at night don't have the time to take care of their families and work with their children on their assignments. Therefore, some of our students aren't learning the new content we are currently teaching through distance learning and aren't able to complete assignments. As an elementary educator I know this is a challenge for many of our families with young children. It's difficult for these families to juggle working, teaching, and taking care of their families.

*I truly miss my students and they miss me. **We need that human interaction and I really hope we can get back to school in the fall where we can teach our students in person and everyone is on a level playing field. Distance learning has definitely shown the inequities that lie in public education.***

Casey, Potter County

Internet issues need to be addressed especially in our rural areas. Rural Internet (DSL in my case) will not support a zoom meeting between me and four students. It breaks, times out, or simply will not connect.

In my own home, I have a Penn State student and a high school student doing remote learning and me teaching remotely. To accommodate all of us I've had to borrow my brother's hot spot until it reached its limit and have had my brother add another hotspot on his cellular plan (he has unlimited - I do not). I added a tablet for another hotspot to my personal cellular account ...just to keep us all connected but even at that we ran out of cellular data halfway through the month (even on the unlimited lines because technically they SLOW down at 15 GB. The cellular companies did give 15 extra GB, but we blew through that halfway through the month of April. I ended up enabling the data in my vehicle just to finish for April. Penn State finally sent my daughter a hot spot also.

The district I live in communicated with my child a lot about continuity of education plans and why it was so important to continue and work through them. The district where I teach, though - I'm not sure why but the students got the "I don't have to do work" mentality hard and fast and it's been somewhat challenging getting them to understand that work is now in fact due.

All but three of my students (90+) students have Internet and about 85% have engaged in my LMS (Learning Management System) where my class is housed. However, during the first week of mandatory learning I only had about 60% participation in the submission of my assignments.

For the most part, I think the directives coming from the state to administrators to Principals and downward has been good. It is a very fluid situation and we all did and are doing the best we can.

Gail, Crawford County

Remote/distance learning is working okay – but as an elementary teacher, we didn't have a true "platform" to utilize and the learning curve continues to be daunting (for students and parents especially). Some students have what they need, but many are hanging on with both parents also trying to work professionally from home—its exceptionally trying for many.

*Having families reach out and let me know how they're doing helps - I can adjust expectations, supports, and assignments accordingly. It is also more helpful now that district administration is learning to temper their expectations to be reasonable. **As a classroom teacher, I am shouldering the burden as the main support (including technical support and primary contact) for families of my students.***

Bob, Bucks County

*As a 5th grade science/social studies teacher, I only have two concerns currently with remote learning. **One is the lack of technology for our students and no internet available for them and me.** I operate off a hotspot and I live behind a Five-star resort, less than a half mile away.*

*Second, I'm always concerned that I am offering the same learning activities to internet students as well as those students who are working from textbooks. **My anxiety over remote learning has significantly been reduced by support from our district, IU, technology personnel and fellow teachers.***

Lisa, Mercer County

*So, these last few months have been exhausting. **As one of my coworkers wisely pointed out, we are going through the 5 stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) but circling back to the beginning on an almost weekly basis.***

Remote/distance learning has been an odd endeavor. I never really know what my students are thinking or feeling. Some have adapted very well. They stay on schedule, complete assignments, and show evidence of learning. Some are making the effort but are clearly distracted and juggling a lot of stuff. And some, unfortunately, are almost completely "off the grid" - at least as it relates to completing schoolwork. They sign into school each day for attendance, but they aren't doing much beyond that.

*I'm one of the fortunate ones. **Our administration has been OUTSTANDING in their support, their continued recognition of the challenges of our students AND teachers and have worked hard to tell us we are doing a great job.** We had enough Chromebooks in our building to issue them to students. They can get help from IT on Tech Tuesdays, including turning in a Chromebook with a problem and getting another. So, from a resource standpoint, we are in a very good place.*

***That being said, we are using a lot of band-aids to cover a gaping wound.** If anyone thinks we are legitimately covering anything close to the originally planned curriculum, that is not happening. Yes, technology is great, but it doesn't replace what we do when we are in a classroom. I teach chemistry which is like teaching math. Students have to "do" it to get it. It's really tough to assess if they are actually learning or just doing a great job of accessing all that Google has to offer. Extra help sessions are via an interactive Google doc so I can try and mimic what I would do in class - ask questions to see where the student is, have them respond, ask another question, etc., while offering examples and other info.*

Also, not really knowing each students' home situation, and knowing that many are working (I had a student start a new job with Amazon on May 1), we are keeping the "workload" and expectations below anything we would normally do.

We've done a pretty good job of designing, building and flying the plane at the same time, but we worry it's not enough. We worry about our students. We worry about getting sued. We worry about what school will look like when we finally return. We worry about our families. We worry about our graduating seniors. We worry about everyone's health. We worry about how we will survive the financial shortcomings that are projected.

We look forward to some semblance of a return to normalcy.

Theresa, Bucks County

*I think that under the unique circumstances that we are in now, distance learning is working; however, it has several drawbacks. **Nothing can replace the face-to-face interaction of a regular classroom setting.** Distance learning is not nearly as effective!*

*I think that our students are given the necessary resources for distance learning, as each family is provided with a device. I think that English Learners and support students are struggling with distance learning, as they are not able to receive the proper supports that they need. **Our administration has been very supportive of this transition and they understand the needs of the teachers, students and families living in our district.***

Amy, Lancaster County

*I am making distance learning work for me, but it is very difficult. We are doing the best we can using Google Classroom and email. Assisting students with Mental Health and or Drug and Alcohol treatment needs has been difficult. **Our local treatment partners in these areas have been a tremendous help.** For the most part we have what we need. I feel pretty good overall but certainly less effective. We have done a great deal to make sure students have what they need.*

Drew, Blair County

I do feel inadequate and unfulfilled. I miss the kids, my colleagues, the buzz that is the High School. The majority of my students are staying engaged amidst the challenges we all are facing and for that I find some solace. I received this note late last night from a quiet young lady in one of my classes. She was just coming into her own, becoming more confident, and raising her hand. I cried... but as I close out my teaching career, I am able to go - being blessed to find it hard to leave a job I love - but it is time...

“I saw that it is Teacher Appreciation Week and especially with what has been going on in the world I just want you to know how much you're appreciated. You're so much more than ‘just’ a teacher. You're my mentor and friend, and I'll take your lessons with me wherever I go. Thank you for believing in me. You showed me how capable I am of achieving great things — and I'll always be grateful to have had you for a teacher.

Thank you for loving each and every one of your students. Thank you for pushing me to be the best student and version of myself I could be. Thank you for being upfront and honest. Thank you for keeping my spirits up when I needed it the most. Thank you for every late night you spent working and every early morning you spent preparing for a lesson. Thank you for not only shaping my future, but many others' futures as well. Thank you for guiding us in the right direction, for being there when it was needed, and most importantly, thank you for

deciding to be a teacher. I am grateful that I was able to be your student! I miss you very much and wish we were still in school!”

Susan, Bucks County

*Education of our children is being severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Although, I honestly think the educators are working even harder now to try to engage their students. The inequities in education funding across the nation, across states, and yes, even within individual counties is now in the spotlight. Special needs students surely are not getting all they need, but since the federal government has never fully funded the IDEA, this pandemic only exacerbates what was already a problem. **How education is being delivered right now depends on internet access, technology resources, funds to support teacher professional development and so many other resources, which vary from place to place. Once again, the zip code where you live is the determining factor of what kind of education your child will have access to during the pandemic. This will have long-lasting effects – academically, socially, and emotionally....***

I also want to speak to the important role ESPs play in the education process. We are an integral part of educating the whole child, and unfortunately are impacted first and the hardest of all educators if cuts are made.... While school has been closed I, for example, have been not only doing secretarial work from home, I have also been making videos of myself reading books as a “Mystery Reader” for my students. I recently received an email from one of our reading specialists who shared one of my videos with her first-grade students. She shared screen shots of their comments. The most exciting news was that for one of the students it was the first bit of work she has submitted since schools shut down. She apparently really enjoyed the story and it made me feel really good. The child is being raised by her grandparents because her own parents are drug addicted. These are the students I worry about the most. They are already behind the eight ball, and they have so many needs. This crisis is only going to increase their need when we get back. We need more social workers, psychologists and counselors in our public schools to address trauma-based need. The pandemic is one more trauma these children will endure.

Many other ESPs in our District are on the front lines delivering free breakfasts and lunches throughout our community. The need here is great. Some are writing personal notes to students to encourage them. Others are making videos depicting a secret talent they can share with the students, saying the Pledge of Allegiance or making announcements. The creativity has been amazing – anything to keep the kids logging in and engaged!

Denise, Delaware County

*Teaching during the pandemic has been a roller coaster of emotions. The last marking period with seniors is one of the great rewards of teaching and that has been lost. I’ve kept up with students in weekly video chats for each class to talk about the week’s material, events in the news or just daily struggles—but nothing replaces the daily contact in the run up to graduation. **Further, worrying about that student who has not logged in or responded to emails is a constant background stress—is it a lack of WiFi? Apathy? Something more serious?***

Moving the curriculum forward has been a challenge, but with great rewards. As a 20+ year veteran, I'm very comfortable with the material, but during this time I have learned online techniques I had been familiar with, but hadn't mastered—Flipgrid to have students leave video responses and to respond to each other, NearPod to integrate video, multiple choice, matching, short answer and brainstorming activities all in one place, and YouTube playlists to give students a curated series of videos on a variety of topics like if Kant and Hume was correct about the foundations of ethics or if we should keep or abolish the Electoral College. And though I've recorded myself on video before, I am now officially almost over the sound of my own voice on tape, as I've made tens of screencasts both for students to explain information and for fellow teachers on how to use technologies that were required on the fly.

Lastly the stress facing students has inspired me to give them more ways to demonstrate their learning. I've been richly rewarded: songs, tik-tok videos, artwork, and poems (in addition to formal papers) all of which have demonstrated understanding of complex ideas from presidential power to different forms of ethical relativism.

Adam, Chester County

As a one-to-one student aide, my work has changed quite a bit, but I'm still doing everything in my power to support my student. *Many of my coworkers are too. We are certainly available to support our teachers and have helped the District when called upon. We have helped pull students' belongings together, helped on ZOOM! Meetings and, when asked by teachers, talked with our students to encourage them to complete assignments. One-to-one aides work with students with disabilities and often times have been alongside one child for many years as they move through the school system. We are the constant for many students—in my district and across the state.****As a support staff professional, I Facetime every day with my student, usually more than once. We have a connection that spans many years from elementary to middle school and now to High School next year. While the work of support staff has changed quite a bit since the outbreak, one thing remains the same, we are a constant source of stability for our students.***

Patty, Delaware County

*The effects of the COVID 19 pandemic will be far reaching and long lasting in my district, which has over 4,300 student and is already 100% Title I. When the shutdown of schools began, the district immediately asked for teacher volunteers to assist in preparing free lunches for daily distribution. Without hesitation, our teachers stepped up on behalf of our families and students. **Pick up of hundreds of meals a week continues today.***

*Teachers were initially tasked with providing educational assignments for students to complete. **As students were not yet online, teachers prepared multiple packets of work that could be copied and handed to families during the food distribution process. Many families picked up work and many didn't. Concerns about those isolated students grew and teachers are anxious and frustrated that our students didn't have the means to learn that so many of the surrounding districts enjoyed.***

The district distributed all available computers to our families, but many of our students are still not connected. Our teachers began developing online curriculum with the help of our Intermediate Unit. Our families still face the lack of devices, lack of internet service, and having to share one device among multiple students in the household. Through it all, our educators continued the process of reaching out and connecting with our students in any way possible.

*Our teachers do our best to service our population, including our special education students, our English language learners, and our high school Advanced Placement students. It is our sincere hope that lawmakers in Pennsylvania will recognize the deep and profound need our district faces in trying to educate our students. **We were a district severely lacking in resources before the shutdown, but our students deserve the same educational opportunities as the wealthiest districts in the state, and they are not getting them.***

Kathy, Delaware County



Testimony of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units

**Dr. John George, Executive Director of Montgomery County Intermediate Unit
Senate Education Committee
May 11, 2020**

Good Morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am here today representing the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU) and am currently serving as the executive director of the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit and the executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units. I want to thank you for this opportunity to appear in front of you to share how the 29 intermediate units across the Commonwealth have supported and continue to support schools in their efforts to provide continuity of education to the 1.7 million children in Pennsylvania.

The system of intermediate units was created by the General Assembly in 1970 and was originally designed to play a critical role in supporting public and private schools across the Commonwealth, as well as assisting the Department of Education's effort to provide a thorough and efficient system of education. In the 50 years since, intermediate units have transformed from a system that predominately served children with disabilities and provided instructional materials to schools to an ever-evolving complex system of public agencies that provide a broad range of services such as professional learning, early intervention services, transportation, curriculum development, technology infrastructure, joint purchasing, health care consortiums, human resource and business office support, virtual learning opportunities, alternative and special education, and a host of other programs and services. During these 50 years,

intermediate units transitioned from a heavy reliance on state budget appropriations, which no longer exist, to being entrepreneurial in order to meet the needs of the schools that we serve. Intermediate units have become so adept at creating programs and services, that today, some people erroneously identify intermediate units as private vendors, which of course we are not. Rather, Intermediate units are governmental agencies designed by the General Assembly to be a critical part of the public education system, and to provide expertise and economies of scale on both the instructional and operational sides of schools.

Today, more than ever, the system of intermediate units is being utilized as originally envisioned. Having worked in other states and serving on the board of the national organization of regional service agencies, I can say with a high level of confidence that the Pennsylvania education system, of which intermediate units play a part, is superior to that of many other states.

Today, intermediate units are well positioned to assist schools transform themselves so they will be able to deliver quality educational programs while simultaneously addressing the public health concerns as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. This is an unprecedented challenge, but let me assure you, intermediate units embrace the challenge.

On Friday, March 13th, all Montgomery County schools were ordered to close; the following Monday, the rest of the Commonwealth's schools were ordered closed. With practically no notice and with no time to prepare, schools were faced with a new paradigm, a paradigm that was not foreseen. Currently schools are delivering education in obscure times. No one here can accurately predict how the pandemic will shape the future. While we cannot change the pandemic, we collectively, by working together, can shape the future of education.

I realize there is strong sentiment and desire for schools to return to normal in September. I propose that we adopt the notion that normal no longer exists. We must transform the way we deliver education, and this metamorphosis will not happen overnight; it is unlikely to happen in

just a few months. It will take time, but the encouraging news is that it has already begun. Intermediate units are already working with school leaders in each of their regions to proactively solve the myriad of challenges associated with this transformation.

I like to think of this transformation process in three stages. The first stage, March 13 through April 10, we can characterize as a time when schools were in a crisis response mode. Confusion was rampant; there were more unknowns than knowns; and fear and anxiety were pervasive. During this time while everyone was scrambling to maintain some resemblance of school, the Department of Education and intermediate units began forging a stronger partnership to provide guidance and support to schools as they grappled to manage the crisis. The immediate priorities for schools were to make sure children had access to food, and to create and provide learning opportunities for children at home. It was also during this stage that the General Assembly passed Act 13. I want to commend the General Assembly for the passage of this legislation, for this single action effectively stabilized Pennsylvania's system of education. I recognize that passing Act 13 took courage and brought criticism, but it was the right thing to do, and in addition to providing stability, it enabled schools to advance from crisis management to the delivery of planned instruction.

I believe we are currently in the second stage of transformation, which began in mid-April and will continue through the end of the current school year. British theologian John Wesley in the mid 1700's accurately described this second stage when he wrote, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." This statement is applicable to the work of schools and intermediate units during this stage. The goals are simple. The first goal is to continue to make food available to children. The second goal is to provide planned instruction to as many children as possible, as quickly as possible, and as effectively as possible. Despite enormous obstacles, schools and intermediate units are doing amazing things and continue to make their best effort to support and teach children. While the goals are simple, the delivery methods are very complex. For over a century, schools relied predominately upon face-to-face

instruction. Today, that method is no longer an option. Therefore, to deliver planned instruction to children at home, schools have to find ways to overcome the gross inequities that exist in both schools and in communities. Many schools are rich with technology while other schools cannot afford technology. Many children have access to internet and devices while many other children do not. This inequity of resources has existed for some time now, however in a post COVID-19 world, it is imperative that this economic disparity be remedied for it is a significant barrier that is preventing far too many children from having access to learning opportunities.

To assist school districts' ability to confront the economic disparities across the Commonwealth, the Department of Education partnered with intermediate units to launch initiatives to support schools' continuity of education plans. In early April, the Department of Education engaged all intermediate units to make on-line content available to districts whose children have access to internet and devices. Today, over 385,000 children in grades K-12 in approximately 150 LEAs have benefited from this project.

At the same time, intermediate units serving schools in remote geographical areas launched a project to support school districts with resources, best practices, and considerations as they delivered non-digital planned instruction to children without access to internet and/or devices. This work is incredibly laborious due to the uniqueness of individual hardship that exists in these remote areas.

Recently, all intermediate units began to partner with Pennsylvania's seven public broadcasting stations to deliver Pennsylvania Academic Standards aligned content to homes all across the Commonwealth. What started as an innovative idea in Harrisburg School District is now rapidly spreading across Pennsylvania. The idea to use television to deliver instruction to children at home is proving to be an effective delivery mechanism.

The success of these projects, distance learning, offline resources, and PBS collaboration, could not be achieved without the support and leadership of the Department of Education. The Secretary's decision to utilize the intermediate unit system to support schools' continuity of education plans has proven to be an effective model. Much has been accomplished, yet there is much yet to do.

It is also during this second stage of transformation that schools, through trial and error, experimentation, and innovation began to deliver planned instruction and other services to children. Everyday school superintendents, administrators, teachers, and support staff accomplish amazing things. As an example, in Montgomery County alone, over 750,000 meals were provided to children during this closure. Just the logistics that needed to be redesigned to provide and deliver these meals while honoring existing health guidelines is simply incredible. Yet, this is happening every day in every community across the Commonwealth. In my 35 years in education, I could not be prouder than I am today, as I witness the efforts of our school leaders, teachers, and staff to benefit children. Anyone who thinks educators are getting paid to stay home and do nothing are ill-informed. Educators are working harder than they ever had before.

As the current school year is coming to an end, schools are already moving to the third stage of transformation – envisioning and creating a school system that currently does not exist. There has been criticism of the Department of Education to develop a single state plan that will solve all the issues for all the schools; this idea is not reasonable. Rather due to the diverse nature of our Commonwealth, coupled with significant economic disparity, plans will need to be regionally created and implemented. Intermediate units, with the support of the Department of Education, are working to build this system. In regions all across Pennsylvania, intermediate units are organizing and leading workgroups to help schools reimagine transportation systems, access to facilities, food service operations, employment policies, health and safety programs, extracurricular activities, many other operations of a school system, and most importantly, the provision of instruction.

In conclusion, schools are not victims of COVID 19; schools, as they have done for over a century, will once again adapt and transform. Educators all across Pennsylvania fully understand that schools will look differently in September 2020. The challenge in front of us, however, requires all of us to work together. I encourage the General Assembly to provide the necessary financial resources to support schools' efforts to deliver continuity of education and to eradicate economic disparity. Schools have accomplished amazing things since mid-March, and I am confident that they will continue to do so. I also assure you that the 29 intermediate units across the Commonwealth will continue to exert leadership, will continue to partner with the Department of Education, and will continue to wholeheartedly support schools to transform the system of education in Pennsylvania. If the Department of Education, intermediate units and schools work together and are supported by the General Assembly, then we will overcome the havoc inflicted by the pandemic. As intermediate units play a critical role, I am pleased to report to you that the intermediate unit system is working as originally designed.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify before you today.