



The mission of the *PA Principals Association* is to ensure a quality education for every child by comprehensively supporting the educational leaders of our schools.

Good morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Dr. Eric Eshbach. I serve as Assistant Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Principals Association. Our membership represents nearly 3,500 elementary and secondary school principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders who serve in public and private schools. On behalf of our members, I thank the committee for providing the opportunity to share our views on Senate Bill 1230, the Back on Track Education Scholarship Account Program.

While the Pennsylvania Principals Association supports efforts to provide funding for much needed reparations in response to months of educational disruption for the students of our Commonwealth, we oppose the provisions set forth in SB 1230 as a means to that end. Our opposition, in short, is simply because this proposed legislation, like others before it that provide limited funds to a small percentage of eligible students, creates a system of winners and losers and does not address the fact that the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted the education of every child in every school across Pennsylvania. The General Assembly has a very important constitutional obligation – to provide for an excellent public school system throughout the Commonwealth so that all children receive a quality education. SB 1230, in its current state, will provide relief to, at best, one-quarter of those children.

Our concerns with SB 1230 include the following:

- We believe SB 1230 will benefit those families with children who are fortunate enough to have parents able and available to complete the required application and those families who are fortunate to have someone at their school work with them to submit the application. Realistically, that eliminates a large percentage of the students we serve. In the 2019-2020 school year, over 45% of the students enrolled in all publicly funded schools in Pennsylvania came from low-income households. These households exist in every community in our state and are present in every geographic and demographic region. This dire economic need is seen through all school communities throughout the State as evidence by high percentages of free and reduced lunch eligible students in urban, rural, and suburban settings. There is no

community or area that you represent that is immune to this social issue. Statistics show that low-income households are more likely to have adults with lower levels of education and/or who are unable to find permanent full-time employment. These households are also more likely to have something other than a traditional, two-parent family structure. While we realize there is a provision in SB 1230 that gives first precedence to those families falling significantly below the Federal Poverty Level, we also predict that these families will be less likely to complete the application process, especially since they will be given only one day to do so. Right now, families are struggling to make ends meet and many are dealing with multiple jobs, while also trying to educate their children in a virtual environment. The timelines and criteria set in SB 1230 do not lend themselves to targeting these most needy families.

- We believe the current structure at the Department of Education will make it difficult, if not impossible, to process these applications in a timely manner. Families will have a three-week window to complete the application process, yet nothing in the bill sets provisions for how quickly the Department will respond to the applications. We strongly encourage your inclusion of PDE leadership to identify a realistic and achievable timeline.
- We believe the cap of \$1,000 per students will do very little to provide the relief the General Assembly may wish to offer. One-thousand dollars towards a tuition bill at a private school provides relief for the families currently paying that bill, but it does not provide the amount of money that some families may need to actually enroll in a private school. Once again, this targets the “haves” over the “have-nots.”

The principals, assistant principals, and school leaders we have spoken with share several common concerns for the students they serve for which provisions of this bill attempt to address. There are areas throughout our Commonwealth in which internet access is inadequate at best. There are schools that have had to stretch budgets in order to purchase hot spots to provide to students in these areas. Many times, cell coverage is also compromised, especially in our most rural districts, thus the hot spots are not reliable. Many schools have also had to issue laptops to students to engage in remote instruction. Again, this has been a huge burden for school budgets.

Equally as concerning, many principals report on significant mental health issues they have witnessed as students return to school. Reports of increased levels of anxiety and depression among students during the events of this spring, summer, and fall cannot go unnoticed. We are receiving reports from

our principals who are experiencing an influx of Safe 2 Say referrals for students who are at home and have limited if any in-person interaction with professional staff.

While SB 1230 allows parents to apply for needed hardware, software, and counseling for their children, all of which are at a critical level at this time, we anticipate that those who are “first-come” will consume a large amount of this money for tuition expenses to the private school to which their child already attends. We suggest that the issues our students face be addressed in a way that benefits all two-million students educated in public, private, and charter schools in our state.

The \$500 million dollars from the COVID-19 Response Restricted Account would be better utilized in a manner that assists entire school communities. For example, a public works project to study and build a broadband network that would be free for all students, focusing on rural and underserved areas. Maryland and Kentucky are studying this option. The General Assembly, serving constituents in a state with such a large area of rural and remote land, should consider ways to address the fact that 39% of America’s rural population and 20% of Pennsylvania’s rural population do not have access to broadband internet (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2017).

Another viable use of the CRRRA money would be to focus on the physical and mental health needs of our students by providing the \$500 million in a formulaically fair and responsible way, to fund the additional nursing, counseling, and mental health needs that have sky-rocketed since March. The infusion of money to districts for this purpose could help to reduce the ratio of students to school nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers to a level that many have proposed in the past. Those services should also be offered to our private and parochial school colleagues as well through the provisions of Auxiliary Services as directed through Act 89 of 1975.

Finally, let’s get serious about helping all children, their families, and their school communities during this difficult time. Imagine, for ease of computation, if each of the 500 school districts in our Commonwealth received one million dollars and the impact it would have on the community. All schools—public and private—would be able to address the nursing, counseling, and technology needs that exist for all students. So, instead of a band-aid approach that targets only some children and their families, the Pennsylvania Principals Association opposes SB 1230 and further suggest that the committee convene a task force of educators to compose a strategy and process for the targets use of the \$500 million to our school communities and each of the two million students we serve.