



Joint Hearing of the Senate Education and Health and Human Services Committees

Testimony of

PA Department of Education Acting Secretary Noe Ortega

March 3, 2021

Thank you, chairs and committee members, for holding this hearing and for your continued interest and support over the last year to ensure that we are doing everything we can to serve our students, educators, and schools. My name is Noe Ortega, and I serve as the Acting Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). I am joined today by Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, Matthew Stem.

The COVID-19 pandemic has called for extraordinary measures and brought unprecedented change to Pennsylvanians. For school communities, that has included implementation of health and safety plans to prevent and mitigate the spread of the virus, a shift from in-person to remote learning, alternative class scheduling, and creative and innovative instruction and delivery of services to students. We at the department admire the hard work and dedication of our fellow educators.

To students who have lost traditional school activities, daily interactions with their peers, and daily routines, we understand your sadness. To caregivers stressed by economic pressures and the challenges of assisting more directly in your student's educational journey, we understand your frustration. To educators working tirelessly to ensure that students and families continue to be served, we appreciate your dedication. As we all work together to prepare students to continue to advance to the next grade level or to graduate and pursue postsecondary and workforce opportunities, it is our shared responsibility to support and provide students of every age with meaningful educational opportunities.

This call to action will be more challenging for some communities, schools, and families, which is why it is vital that we continue working collectively to focus time, resources, and energy on providing equitable learning opportunities for every student in the commonwealth. We are a state rich in diversity, and that means no single solution is effective for all schools or all students. By evaluating local needs and partnering to employ or expand upon available resources, schools are adapting and responding to their communities and continuing to provide high-quality education to their students.

The department's primary role this past year has been to support all our schools as they navigate this uncertain and ever-changing environment. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Department of Education has collaborated with the Department of Health (DOH) to provide schools with guidance, resources, and tools that reflect the most current COVID-19 data, science, and research and to keep schools apprised of changes at the state and federal level. PDE staff also meet regularly with education leaders and organizations throughout the state concerning our evidence-based guidance and recommendations. These conversations keep us



grounded in the challenges and opportunities facing our local school communities and have been used to inform state policy efforts and target resources and supports.

The Department of Education's ability to navigate the pandemic and provide statewide support has been made possible through strong partnerships at all levels. The unwavering collaboration of the state's 29 Intermediate Units, as well as other key educational stakeholders and professional groups, have been critical in providing communication and assistance to school districts, charter schools, and nonpublic schools, as well as educators and school leaders. A partnership with Pennsylvania PBS made it possible for schools to use public television and datacasting technology (using television broadcasting signals to send web content) to provide remote learning to students in areas where broadband connectivity is low or nonexistent, cell service is weak, and device/hotspot availability is limited. Pennsylvania's Office of Commonwealth Libraries expanded its 24/7 homework hotline, while local libraries loaned Wi-Fi hot spots and other lendable technology to students. Partnerships with the Department of Human Services and the Department of Agriculture allowed schools to provide free meals to students even if they aren't physically in school learning with their friends and teachers.

Over the summer and throughout the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, PDE and DOH developed several pieces of health and safety guidance that school leaders could use prior to and during the school year to provide safe learning environments. Such resources include guidance on reopening schools, mitigation strategies, recommended instructional models, case management in school communities, resources to support student and staff wellness and to create positive online learning environments, and recommendations grounded in data and existing public health conditions in the commonwealth. The agencies continue to work together to support schools as opportunities arise to assist them as they move toward offering more in person learning this spring.

Additionally, PDE created the *Roadmap for Education Leaders*, an online hub of resources, research, and strategies to assist school leaders in creating equitable learning systems during the challenges of mitigating COVID-19. The roadmap identifies six key processes essential for ensuring systems and policies are flexible and responsive to the needs of students and school communities: establishing a team; selecting instructional delivery models; supporting the social and emotional wellness of students and staff; focusing on effective instruction and assessment; communicating with stakeholders; and providing high-quality ongoing professional learning activities. This work will continue this spring with the launch of a series of resources and webinars as part of our work with the Accelerated Learning segment of the Roadmap that provides guidance to local education agencies and schools in mitigating learning gaps of students.

The department appreciates the flexibility the General Assembly provided in both Act 13 of 2020 and Act 136 of 2020. These changes eliminated high stakes provisions for students and teachers and removed other statutory barriers that were prohibiting PDE and schools from addressing immediate concerns caused by the pandemic. PDE continues to monitor changing conditions for any additional issues that may need to be addressed going forward.



We know this is not an easy time for Pennsylvania students, educators, and families; however, never has it been more important for all of us to work together to ensure students continue learning throughout the remainder of this school year and the years to come. We want to again commend all educators, school staff, and caregivers who have worked together in innovative ways to serve our children.

We 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. Quite simply, our goal is to create the conditions to return students to in-person instruction as safely as possible and as soon as possible. There is much to be done in the weeks and months ahead to accomplish this and we are committed to working with lawmakers, partner agencies and other stakeholders as we move forward together.