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Written Statement to the Senate Education Committee
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

February 27, 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee and share my experience and opinion on public education during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful for your time and for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this extremely important issue.

BACKGROUND

My name is Chad Williams and my wife, Cara, and I are parents to four children, ages 17, 15, 14 and 12. Two of our children are in high school and two are in middle school. Our experience over the last year has been extremely stressful and destructive. As a family, we have suffered financially, physically, psychologically and emotionally.

Our oldest daughter struggled so significantly that we were forced to move her to private school, at tremendous financial cost to our family. Although our 15-year-old daughter has fared the best of our four children, she has also struggled emotionally and academically. The virtual education model was such a disaster for our middle school children that we made the difficult decision to homeschool them until our schools fully re-open.

Over the last year, my wife and I have spent countless hours per week educating our children. Meanwhile, in these uncertain economic times, the demands in our professional lives also increased. We frequently work late into the night/early morning and on weekends just to satisfy our professional obligations, while also satisfying our myriad family obligations. The tremendous burdens placed on our family this past year have left all of us exhausted. Our health has deteriorated. We remain isolated from our extended family, religious community, friends and neighbors.

As a result of prolonged social isolation, our children have lost many positive childhood experiences. Their educational and social development continues to suffer, through no fault of their own. Our sense of community has suffered as well. As a result of my decision to speak up and demand that schools reopen, I have been publicly ridiculed, people have threatened my livelihood and I have been marginalized by members of the school board and the district superintendent.

Yet I know that the Williams Family is but one of more than 30 million households with school-aged children in the United States that are living through their own private nightmare. While our story is uniquely our own, we know we are not alone. Indeed, despite the pain this has caused our family, we consider ourselves blessed. We are ever mindful that we are among the most fortunate casualties of this massive failure of leadership.

We are fortunate, in part, because we live in the Unionville Chadds Ford School District (the “District”). The District is widely considered one of the best school districts in the Commonwealth and is comprised of seven municipalities, spanning two counties (Chester and Delaware) in Southeastern, Pennsylvania. Total population in the District is approximately 26,000, or roughly 2.4% of the nearly 1.1 million people who live in Chester and Delaware counties.

By national (and even state) standards, the District has not been hit hard by the pandemic. According to the most recent statistics published by the Chester County Health Department (“CCHD”) (which serves both Chester and Delaware counties), there have been 65,774 total “positive cases” in Chester and Delaware counties, with 1,976 deaths. By comparison, the District has had 1,096 total “positive cases” (just over 1% of total positive cases in the two counties) and 17 deaths (less than 1% of total deaths in the two counties). These statistically low numbers are particularly noteworthy given that the District is home to at least three 55+ communities, one very large nursing home (the county-owned, 275 bed Pocopson Home) and the Chester County Prison (which houses more than 700 prisoners). There is no evidence that a statistically significant number of cases in the District (or any of the deaths, for that matter) involved individuals within the age ranges representing the staff and students in the school community.

Notwithstanding the statistically infinitesimal impact of COVID, nearly all middle and high school students in Unionville have had *fewer than 14 days* of in person instruction in the last year. Indeed, as late as January 2021, my children had only *2 days* of in-person instruction since schools were closed in March 2020. In light of the above-referenced statistics, the fact that Unionville schools have been closed to middle and high school students for most of the last year is simply inexcusable.

While we are well aware that our children are among the more “fortunate” casualties of this crisis, that does not make the harm this is causing them any more acceptable. The negative academic impact of the lockout has been, predictably, abysmal. Just by way of example, data I accessed through an open records request revealed that over the last year the number of Unionville students receiving at least one D or F grade has *tripled* for middle schoolers and *doubled* for high schoolers. If Unionville is indeed a “top performing” school district, these numbers should shock the conscience of every responsible adult in the Commonwealth. In light of just this one statistic, consider the carnage lockouts are wreaking on students in school districts that were underperforming *before* the crisis! The societal fall-out from this massive leadership failure will be felt throughout the Commonwealth, and the country, for decades.

Likewise, the psychological and emotional toll this has taken on my children, and countless other children throughout the Commonwealth, is utterly tragic. As a society, we spend far more time considering the harm isolation causes convicted criminals than we have spent considering the negative psychological effects of prolonged social isolation on children and adolescents *whose brains are still developing*. For all the talk of “following the science,” the statistics concerning the alarming increase in incidents of self-harm, suicidal ideation, substance abuse and other serious physical and psychological damage resulting from school, athletic and activity shutdowns have been largely ignored.

Finally, the policies blindly forced upon young people, without any scientific basis, are perpetuating a culture of irrational fear and confusion. For example, the conflicting messages on masks from the Director of the National Institute of Health (which, during the last year, have ranged from “not necessary,” to “mandatory,” to “wear two or more”) do not inspire confidence. Candidly, I do not know whether wearing a mask makes a meaningful difference. What I do know, however, is that there are no peer reviewed, conclusive scientific studies demonstrating the efficacy of masks in the school environment. On the other hand, one thing the “science” unequivocally demonstrates is that there is no significant risk of transmission – either among students or from students to adults – in the school environment. Yet many schools throughout the Commonwealth refuse to fully open their doors. Has anyone considered the completely illogical message this sends our young people?

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

While I commend the Committee for holding this panel discussion, I must respectfully ask: “*Why has it taken so long for the General Assembly to do something?*”

By failing to act, the General Assembly has ceded its exclusive authority under the Pennsylvania Constitution to a variety of actors with conflicting motives: Executive Branch agencies that are exercising questionable emergency powers by fiat; county health officials who are swayed by local political pressure; powerful teachers unions that brazenly refuse to abide by their contracts; school boards run by incapable lay people; and inept superintendents who seem to be more concerned with playing the various constituencies against themselves than they are with actually solving problems.

Ordinarily, the more local the governance the better. But in my personal experience, the manner in which the Unionville Chadds Ford School District has handled access to education is an example of the absurdity of leaving a matter of such importance to unelected bureaucrats, politically powerful unions, ill-equipped school superintendents and low-level elected officials who are demonstrably incapable of properly exercising what little authority they possess.

As noted above, there are a statistically insignificant number of cases in Unionville, yet schools have remained closed for most of the last year. In other words, while there is no actual (based on local statistics) or theoretical (based on state and national statistics) risk of community spread in the school environment, the members of the Unionville school board are permitted to substitute their flawed and irrational judgment for the judgment of the majority of parents who have *unequivocally* expressed a desire for a full, in-person education *option*. In the face of the stubborn refusal of the school board to act upon the will of their constituents, families in the District have no recourse but to wait for several years to attempt to vote them all out.

In Unionville, under the “leadership” of a school board president who does not have children in school (and therefore does not have to live with his own policy decisions), the school board is unwilling to exercise reasonable discretion, has demonstrated a stunning lack of self-awareness and has a puzzling focus on secondary and tertiary priorities. This fact is perfectly illustrated by three recent examples:

- In late July 2020, the District released a re-opening plan that would have offered, among other things, a full, 5 day, in-person education option. Less than two weeks later, however, purportedly in response to a change in “guidance” from state and local agencies, the District abandoned this plan and determined that the “mandate” of 6 ft. distancing made it impossible to offer in-person education. When presented with contrary statements by the PDE, DOH and the CCHD (each confirming unequivocally that their respective “guidance” statements were merely recommendations and *not* “mandates”) the school board nevertheless determined (without logical explanation) that they deemed the guidance to be mandatory. That single change (from *recommending* 3 ft. distancing to *recommending* 6 ft. distancing), with absolutely no scientific basis for doing so, is the primary reason the Unionville school board has stated that it cannot reopen schools.
- In the Fall of 2020, at a time when schools were completely closed to in-person instruction and students were denied full access to athletics and other activities, the school board allocated more time and resources to renaming and “rebranding” the allegedly offensive high school mascot than it did to developing and executing a coherent plan for a full reopening of all schools. While reasonable minds may differ on the propriety of renaming the Unionville mascot, to move forward with such a divisive dismantling of tradition at a time when families were denied full access to education demonstrates appallingly poor judgment and a complete lack of self-awareness.
- The Unionville superintendent is one of the highest paid superintendents in the Commonwealth (i.e., in the top 10). Despite the fact that schools have remained closed for most of the last year, and the District still does not have a plan for a full reopening, the school board recently announced (without any sense of irony) that it was in the process of negotiating a new (and shockingly lucrative) contract. In the real world, many business owners and working people are simply trying to hang on. But in the judgment of the Unionville school board, it is appropriate to reward the superintendent with a new contract when the number middle and high school students in his district who have D and F grades is growing exponentially.

It is worth remembering that we were told that the entire purpose of closing schools was to “slow the spread” and “flatten the curve” so that hospitals would not be overrun. Yet, since schools were closed in March 2020, there have been just over 1,000 *total cases* (not symptomatic cases, *total positive cases*) in the seven municipalities that make up a district of over 25,000 people. Despite overwhelming evidence that there is virtually no statistical risk of community spread in the school environment, somehow this unqualified school board is permitted to hold thousands of middle and high school students hostage, with no end in sight.

It simply cannot be the policy of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to grant so much power to school boards that plainly (and consistently) demonstrate an inability to make rational decisions.

I do not like to identify problems without offering proposed solutions. While I am not an elected official, if I were I would immediately advocate the following legislative action:

- Statutory Default Standard of In-Person Education. I would call for an amendment to the Public School Code of 1949 (the “Code”) to make clear that, absent an enforceable emergency order (limited in scope and duration) the default standard is that all public schools in the Commonwealth must remain physically open for in-person instruction. Full stop. Individual school districts may elect to make virtual learning options available to those who prefer to learn remotely, but in all cases those who wish to attend school in-person, with instruction from a qualified teacher who is present in the classroom, must have that option. Any extension of an emergency declaration limiting access to in-person public education beyond a statutorily prescribed period of time (i.e., 30 days, for example) would require an affirmative act of the legislature. In my view, this structure is presently embodied in the Code, but perhaps such an amendment is necessary to eliminate any confusion going forward.
- Limitations on Infringements of Personal Liberty of Indefinite Duration. Absent a proper emergency declaration that is narrowly tailored in scope and duration, public schools in the Commonwealth should not be permitted to mandate infringements on individual liberty (such as mandating face coverings, forcing vaccinations, etc.). As noted above, while many have accepted the premise that masks reduce the spread of this virus (which may or may not be the case), there have been no affirmative legislative or administrative actions on this matter that have been subject to appropriate judicial review. On matters of individual liberty, we simply cannot accept unbounded restrictions on personal freedom, particularly when there have been no peer-reviewed studies, public hearings or definitive legislation or regulations subject to notice and comment. This is particularly true where, as here, there is no evidence that children or adolescents are “spreaders” of this virus. We simply cannot normalize infringements on individual liberty without restriction. Forcing children to wear masks for an indefinite period of time (when there is no evidence that doing so protects anyone) is not just bad policy, it is a violation of basic human dignity. The Commonwealth cannot grant public schools unchecked authority to impose such restrictions.
- School Choice. This crisis has exposed an overwhelming imbalance of power that favors the public education machine over the rights of families to provide for the proper education of their children. If Pennsylvania adopts School Choice, far more children will have access to proper in-person instruction, even under circumstances such as these. Moreover, given that funding for public schools is based (in part) on enrollment, if families had the power to direct their tax dollars in the manner that is in the best interests of their children, I suspect far more public schools would be open right now. School Choice is, indeed, one of the top civil rights issues of our time.

I acknowledge that there are principled arguments against the initiatives I advocate above. But isn't that the very purpose of the General Assembly? To propose creative policy solutions that are subject to robust debate, followed by legislative action? On behalf of the families and children of the Commonwealth, I respectfully request that you use the power granted exclusively to you under the Pennsylvania Constitution to do something to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

