



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Education Reform**

**Presented to the
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By

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Good morning, Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Aaron Chapin and I currently serve as Vice President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I'm honored to have the opportunity today to present testimony on behalf of our 178,000 members. Thank you for inviting PSEA to testify.

When we received the invitation, we were intrigued by today's topic. Depending on who you talk to, "education reform" can mean very different things. And quite honestly, if you told a regular teacher that policymakers were talking about education reform in Harrisburg, my bet is that they would feel skeptical trepidation. We've all seen "Education Reform" efforts come and go. For 30 years now, from the beginnings of the school choice movement, to *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, and the Common Core, "Education Reform" has meant high-stakes testing, punitive accountability, and competition among lower-performing schools. These reforms were all well-meaning, but history is littered with well-meaning reforms that have either had no impact or made things worse. And, as a classroom teacher for the past 25 years, I can tell you that some of these efforts -- particularly the obsessive focus on high-stakes testing -- have unquestionably made our schools worse places for both students and teachers. And that's why I appreciate Senator Martin's offer to have a different type of conversation, one that is about (lower case) education reforms, which we have taken to mean research-driven, common sense approaches to improving public education in this current post-pandemic environment.

The truth is that the stakes have never been higher. This pandemic has caused an unprecedented interruption in learning and an unprecedented strain on the social, emotional, mental, and physical health of many students. We cannot get this wrong. Now is the time to think about reform as recognizing the impact of poverty on outcomes, providing schools the resources they need, treating teachers as the professionals they are, providing students access to nurses, counselors, and other health professionals, and ensuring our classrooms are filled with learning, not just test preparation.

The pandemic was a test of public education's foundation – at both a system-level and a personal-level for educators and students. No one got things 100 percent right. Everyone did the best they could under the circumstances. Hopefully we will prepare to turn the page on the virus if we can adhere to continued social distancing and masking rules. I'm thrilled that we're finally at this point - where schools are safely reopening for in-person instruction. This is in large part due to the efforts of the COVID-19 Vaccine Joint Task Force and its special initiative to vaccinate over 100,000 school staff. I would be remiss if I didn't recognize the Task Force, and many of you, who advocated on behalf of educators across the state to prioritize the vaccination of school staff, so schools could safely reopen for in-person instruction. That effort demonstrates what's possible in education when everyone collaborates toward a common goal.

Now we have an opportunity to examine the impact of the pandemic on our education system and students. What did the pandemic expose about our schools? What pre-existing problems did it accelerate that we will need to deal with now? What was the impact on students – their well-being, mental health, and future achievement? What do our teachers, school counselors, and others need to support our students? These are just some of the questions that we should be asking ourselves now. This is how PSEA is approaching policy conversations around “education reform” in 2021.

This opportunity also comes with the benefit of an unprecedented amount of Federal financial support. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) included nearly \$5 billion for Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER), with almost \$1 billion of that allocation set aside to address learning loss. Combined with around \$2 billion in ESSER funding from CARES II, public schools are slated to receive almost \$7 billion in Federal relief that will be available through at least September 2024.¹ Public education has never seen an investment of this magnitude in such short period of time. We need to work together at the state and local level to ensure that these dollars are invested wisely, and schools aren’t bombarded with outside for-profit entities marketing questionable products or services.

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Without any hesitation, I can tell you that accelerated learning is one of the top priorities of our members in classrooms. Efforts to assess where students are academically started last fall in many cases with diagnostic and benchmark assessments, but formative assessments happen on a weekly if not daily basis. As teachers, we’re constantly looking at students to figure out where they are and meet their needs. I would urge policymakers to think about accelerated learning from a simple, three-part framework:

1. **Two years (at least)** - We aren’t going to fix learning loss in one summer. Accelerated learning must be an intentional multi-year strategy. Summer school could be one tactic within a comprehensive accelerated learning strategy. I worry that many people keep thinking about this summer as the time when teachers can fix what has transpired over the last year. That’s a simplistic view of a very complex problem. The Federal government gave us almost \$7 billion to spend through September 2023 for a reason. Accelerated learning programs need to begin, or in many schools continue, through the summer and into the next two school years.
2. **Holistic** - Accelerated learning needs to be a holistic strategy that focuses on the academic, social, and emotional needs of children as required by Federal law. Students

¹ While ARP requires LEAs to spend Federal ESSER resources by September 2023, with the inclusion of the Tydings Amendment provision, ARP ESSER funds will be available for obligation until September 2024. Based on the Tydings Amendment, the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) allows grantees to carry over for one additional year any Federal education funds that were not obligated in the period for which they were appropriated.

must be engaged and ready to learn for academic progress to be made – and that is not possible until they are able to stabilize and recover from the hardship and trauma this pandemic has caused. Many children have suffered during this pandemic and schools need to attend to their mental health needs.

3. **In-person** - Finally, we shouldn't rely on virtual learning to solve the problems created by hybrid or virtual learning this year. The pandemic reinforced, once again, that the vast majority of students do better with in-person instruction. While some students thrive in cyber education, whether that be through cyber charter schools or virtual district instruction, we need to recognize that most students need to be in classrooms with their peers, interacting with their teachers in person and engaging in live learning strategies such as labs, projects, and demonstrations. Schools need to learn from our experience with implementing academic remediation in 2014. We cannot rely on virtual learning in any form to solve the problems created by virtual learning.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

As I said a moment ago, our responsibility extends to the whole child, including the child's academic, social, and emotional needs. The pandemic has only magnified the crisis of our kids' mental health – including high levels of anxiety and increased rates of suicide and suicidal ideations. Suicide, self-harm, and bullying dominate the tips received by Safe2Say, with reports related to “Life Safety” matters significantly increasing beginning in March 2020.² The lack of personal connection and the increased loneliness and isolation experienced by students and educators over the past year has led to heightened levels of anxiety and depression.

Schools play a huge part in service delivery for mental health support, helping with early identification of issues, connecting kids and families with mental health resources, and teaching the types of coping and resiliency skills kids need to manage their emotions and deal with stress. Schools that are properly staffed and resourced offer the ideal setting and infrastructure for students to access the full continuum of mental health supports including prevention, intervention, and collaboration with families and community providers.

Despite the clear need for more school-based mental health professionals, Pennsylvania law does not require school districts to employ certified school counselors, school psychologists, or social workers at all, and especially not within recommended professional-to-student ratios. Those schools that are lucky enough to have school psychologists on staff often require much of their focus to be on special education assessments and individualized education plans rather than mental health support for the general population. What this means is that too many students don't

² Safe2Say saw an increase in Life Safety tips such as suicide and self-harm at the start of the pandemic in March 2020. From July 2019 until March 13, 2020, 17% of tips received were designated as Life Safety matters, but starting in March, 37% of tips received were in this category. [Safe2Say Something Annual Report](#).

have access to a school counselor or another certified school-based mental health professional to provide them with support, intervention, referral, and follow-up in their time of need.

Safely reopening schools is an important first step to beginning to address the mental health needs of students, but that alone is not enough. Schools must establish a short-term strategy to address mental health needs stemming from the pandemic. This could require local collaborations with counties and mental health providers. It could also require schools to use Federal resources to employ an adequate complement of school-based mental health professionals on a temporary basis. But let's be clear that Pennsylvania needs a long-term strategy to improve student access to direct mental health support in the school setting. Some might point to the school safety grants as a solution, but most schools are not applying for school safety grants to bring on professionals to provide mental health services. Have we asked administrators what we can do to change that?

TEACHER SHORTAGE AND DIVERSITY

A strong, committed, and diverse educator workforce is foundational to achieving educational equity for all children in Pennsylvania. But the national educator shortage is a crisis that harms students, current educators, and the public education system overall. The shortage is felt in every community across the Commonwealth, but much more acutely in the schools educating children of color and students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Like student mental health, the pandemic only worsened an existing problem, i.e., the teacher shortage. According to a new [LPI report](#), longstanding educator shortages, which are often most acute in high-need fields and high-need schools, appear to be growing more severe due to a range of pandemic-related factors, including rising early retirements and resignations and a reduced pipeline of incoming teachers.

Pennsylvania is not the “exporter” of teachers that many of us remember. There was a 33 percent drop in the number of college students completing Pennsylvania teacher preparation programs between 2013-14 and 2018-19. There was a 73 percent drop in the number of Instructional I certificates issued by the Department of Education (PDE) between 2012-13 and 2019-20. And if that's not enough to convince people of a looming crisis, I'm sure every elected official here today has heard from their school administrators over the past several years about the substitute teacher shortage. The substitute teacher shortage was the first indicator of what is now the teacher shortage crisis.

The teacher shortage is even worse when one examines the significant and harmful lack of diversity in the Commonwealth's educator workforce. As of 2020, teachers of color in Pennsylvania made up only 6.3 percent of the educator workforce.³ Although this is slightly higher than the number of teachers of color in 2013, the rate of increase is far from keeping up with our changing student demographics. Currently students of color make up 33.5 percent of

³ Analysis of state educator data by Keystone Crossroads and [Research for Action](#).

Pennsylvania’s student population in public schools. Pennsylvania has one of the worst student-to-teacher racial disproportionality rates – only five other states are worse than Pennsylvania.⁴

Pennsylvania must enact a comprehensive framework of policies and resources to remove barriers to teacher preparation programs, as well as recruit individuals to become certified educators and remain in the profession. This framework should address what research has shown to be the primary factors that either disincentivize people from entering the profession or push them to quit, including the following:

- Ensuring an affordable preparation pathway, including both post-secondary education tuition and fees associated with tests teacher candidates must take to complete their certification;
- Quality compensation commensurate with the education and work expected from our teachers;
- Respect and ongoing professional supports; and
- Autonomy in the classroom and the ability to teach not to a test, but for the sake of learning.

Speaking of testing, one of the things we most consistently hear about from our members is the over-focus on standardized testing and the harm it is doing to the profession and the education system as a whole.

The Public School Code and State regulations have established high standards to enter and remain in a teacher preparation program. In addition, during that time teacher prep students have multiple classroom experiences and are steeped in pedagogy classes. They take an array of culminating exams to ensure they understand the methods of teaching and the content they will need to convey to their students. Then, we make new educators work through a “probationary period” while they all but complete a master’s degree. And, throughout their careers they have to maintain their active certification through continuing professional development courses and activities.

In essence, we are assuring that we have trained, expert professionals in front of our classrooms. But then we handcuff them. We have rigid structures in place because what we all know is that we are teaching to the test. Using very explicit language anchored to state assessments, we take away the freedom for these professionals to use the skills they have in a way that will energize a desire to learn in schools. To adapt for students who need it. This is disheartening to many, and a reason why they leave the profession.

An “Education Reform” strategy that has been tried but has not demonstrated sustainable improvements is so-called “fast-track programs.” School systems spend significant money, time, and attention on these teachers who most often leave after a few years to pursue other careers.

⁴ <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf>

They leave behind a gap in efforts to build a strong culture and enhance collaboration. This turnover also impacts students who derive security from consistent faces in the school. Strong school culture depends upon teachers who are known and who know the students, the parents, the community, and the leaders of the schools in which they teach.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

The key elements of any good education – a foundation of excellent teaching, challenging academic content and curriculum, support of student mastery of skills needed for the future, and support of the physical, social, and emotional well-being of students – are the same in any school. For some of our schools, though, these elements must be integrated and amplified to meet the needs of their students and surrounding community. We need to create the conditions for learning so that students and families can engage in a community effort of continuous improvement with a focus on equitable outcomes. That’s where “Community Schools” comes in.

Community schools are public schools that partner with school staff, leadership, families, and community organizations to identify local needs, assets, and priorities – and design programming built upon trust and respect that provides well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students’ school success. A full-service community school is a public elementary or secondary school that participates in a community-based effort to provide *coordinated and integrated comprehensive services*, such as education and health services, through community-based organizations and public and private partnerships. Services can be provided to students, families, and communities during the school year (including on weekends) and during the summer.

The Federal government has recognized the value and potential of “Full-Service Community Schools” (FSCS) since 2008 when the FSCS program was initially created as a demonstration program through the Department of Education Appropriations Act. Since then, the program has also been included in Title IV of ESEA and most recently as one of the ways schools can invest Federal relief funding for supporting students under the recently enacted American Rescue Plan.⁵

Individual school districts in Pennsylvania have undertaken efforts around community schools. We’re aware of initiatives in Erie, the Lehigh Valley, and Philadelphia. Senator Wayne Langerholc proposed to elevate this research-based strategy last session with the creation of a pilot program to expand it further under SB 850, a bill PSEA strongly supported. This the right time for the State to encourage and support a far-reaching community schools strategy.

There are several key elements for implementing and sustaining a quality community school, including:

⁵ The community school model is listed in the expenditure options for the ESSER program: “Providing mental health services and supports, including through the implementation of evidence-based full-service community schools.”

- The program is co-designed with local educators (including administrators, teachers, and support professionals), students, families, and relevant community organizations.
- A needs assessment based within the community drives planning. The assessment identifies the academic, physical, nonacademic, health, mental health, and other needs of students, families, and community residents.
- MOUs exist among all partner entities in the community that will assist, coordinate, and/or provide services.
- Transparent measures of success are built into the plan along with shared community accountability.

FINANCIAL RECOVERY LAW

It has been almost a decade since Pennsylvania enacted Act 141 of 2012, commonly referred to as the “Financial Recovery Law” – a reform measure aimed at state intervention/oversight in financially struggling schools. Today, there are three districts in financial receivership (Chester-Upland, Duquesne, and Harrisburg), three districts in financial recovery status (York City, Penn Hills, and Scranton), and four districts in financial watch status (Aliquippa, Reading, Steelton-Highspire, and Wilkinsburg).⁶ As with any good public policy approach, PSEA would suggest that it’s time to look at the law and determine what worked well and what needs to be revised in order to improve its effectiveness. There are some changes that we would suggest based on the lessons we’ve learned through its operation since 2012.

1. **Mandatory collaboration and accountability** – It is sad that we have to raise this issue, but sometimes chief recovery officers (CROs) and receivers simply don’t cooperate or collaborate with PDE. The law requires CROs to participate in monthly meetings with PDE and submit monthly reports. Receivers are required to submit quarterly reports to PDE. However, there is no accountability if they don’t adhere to these requirements, short of PDE’s appointing a new CRO and the process starting over again. Receivers are only accountable to the local court of common pleas that appointed them. There is nothing in the law that requires collaboration with the department. PDE, to its credit, has implemented a technical assistance program, but some of these appointed officials just ignore PDE’s recommendations. CROs, superintendents, and boards that have worked collaboratively with PDE have experienced better financial outcomes. The law is severely lacking in local accountability. Over the past nine years, we’ve seen superintendents and school boards ignore or fail to implement an approved financial recovery plan. We are also aware of situations in which a district’s business office staff refused to cooperate or hand over financial records. This is unacceptable. When people refuse to comply with the law, there should be ramifications for these actions. The financial recovery law doesn’t provide a pathway to address this type of accountability unless the district is in

⁶ Erie Public Schools were placed in financial watch status as part of Act 86 of 2016 and not through the traditional pathways via the actual financial recovery law.

receivership, and even then, the law’s effectiveness is reliant on an ethical receiver that wants to hold people accountable for their job duties. Districts shouldn’t have to enter receivership to ensure local compliance.

2. **Exiting Recovery Status** – There isn’t a viable way to exit financial recovery status. Districts must accomplish the goals set forth in their financial recovery plans, as well as meet 18 criteria to exit financial recovery status.⁷ Thus, termination of recovery status isn’t solely dependent on resolving the financial issues that pushed the district into recovery status in the first place. For example, one of the 18 criteria relate to an increase in the assessed value of taxable real estate over the previous five years. This is outside of a school district’s control. Recovery plans are required to address academic achievement as well; therefore, standardized test scores can hold back a district from exiting financial recovery status. My point is that termination of financial recovery has a broader set of parameters than those that caused a district to be identified in the first place. Pennsylvania should tighten this law and ensure exit only relates to financial criteria under the district’s control.
3. **Act 47 Connection** – School districts located in distressed municipalities under Act 47 have the unfortunate distinction of always having some sort of connection to the financial recovery law – even if a district is able improve its financial standing and exit financial recovery status. What is unfair is that this connection comes with what is essentially an “express lane” to financial receivership. I don’t think anyone thinks that the state shouldn’t keep a close eye on districts in distressed municipalities. The financial viability of the municipality impacts the financial viability of its school district. However, that monitoring can be done through the law’s financial watch status. Why should a district that has been able to exit financial recovery status always have the threat of receivership linger over it because of something that is outside of its control?

CONCLUSION

I hope you find our thoughts and recommendations useful as you all begin to think about your policy priorities heading into budget season. As always, PSEA looks forward to working with you as we all collaborate to tackle the most pertinent and time-sensitive issues facing our public schools as they recover from the pandemic. I look forward to answering your questions, and again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee.

⁷ Section 641-A(9) requires a district’s financial recovery plan to include the criteria for a district to exit financial recovery status. Exit criteria relate to the regulations promulgated by PDE under Section 621-A(a)(2).