



Senate Education Committee Hearing

Testimony of

PA Department of Education

April 12, 2021

Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you 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 Matt Stem, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the PA Department of Education (PDE). I am joined today by our Special Advisor, Dr. Sherri Smith, and Danielle Mariano, Deputy Secretary for Administration.

As part of the discussion today, we would like to address some of the educational and funding inequities impacting the Commonwealth, elevate reforms we believe are vital to preparing schools and students long into the future, update the committee on some of the important work of the department on addressing learning gaps and share the ways we are working with our partner agencies to create the conditions for a return to in-person instruction.

First, though, we want to commend our school leaders, educators and support staff for their tireless commitment to students throughout this pandemic. The daily challenges they have had to address to balance the mitigation of COVID-19 with the academic and social needs of students is monumental. Additionally, we share our heartfelt gratitude to our parents and students throughout the Commonwealth for their patience and persistence through the many transitions they have experienced over this past year.

Charter School Reform

In terms of inequities in our public education system, we believe that there is a great need and a great opportunity for reform to Charter School Law. In 1997, the General Assembly enacted Pennsylvania's Charter School Law to provide the entire public education system with a mechanism for innovation and flexibility—to allow a subset of the public education system to pilot and perfect practices that might carry benefits for the rest. The emerging consensus around charter reform reflects the fact that there is an inherent contradiction between a law premised on innovation and a law that is mostly unchanged a quarter century later.

Governor Wolf has proposed comprehensive charter school reform legislation, sponsored by Senator Lindsey Williams and Representative Joe Ciresi, in the Senate and House, respectively, to address some of the most controversial aspects for both charters and school districts. The legislation would:



- Establish performance standards that hold charter schools accountable for the educational outcomes of students and a moratorium on new cyber charter schools;
- Limit student enrollment in low performing cyber charter schools until outcomes improve;
- Require charter management companies be subject to the Right to Know Act and State Ethics Act, and post employee salaries on PDE's website like public school districts; and
- Create fair, predictable, and equitable funding for school districts, including in the areas of special education funding and cyber charter tuition payments.

Fair and Equitable Investments in Education

The Governor also believes that addressing historic and structural inequities in Basic Education Funding is of paramount importance. The pandemic shed greater light on historic disparities and heightened the urgency for a sustainable solution. We, at PDE, are prepared to work with the administration and the General Assembly in any ways possible to work toward those solutions.

When the Governor proposed his 2021-22 FY budget last February, Congress had not yet passed the American Rescue Plan, which includes \$5 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding for Pennsylvania's K-12 schools. While this funding is vital to ensuring our educational systems recovery from the challenges of the pandemic, it is one-time emergency aid intended to cover unforeseen health, safety, and educational expenses, particularly for our most vulnerable students. The funding does not – and will not – address the enduring resource inequities in Pennsylvania's education system. PDE is currently working to provide guidance and support to schools as they plan carefully how to thoughtfully and strategically use these funds to mitigate learning gaps and other impacts of COVID-19 over the next few years.

Mitigating COVID-19 Impacts

Over this past year, PDE has provided critical resources, research and tools for Pennsylvania educators on the *Roadmap for Educational Leaders* website. Accelerated learning is the next phase of the Roadmap. The Department, in partnership with the PA Intermediate Units and Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), announced last week a new phase of the Roadmap called *Accelerated Learning through an Integrated System of Support*. This new toolkit provides school communities with an equitable, systematic process to making important decisions related to the start of the new school year and closing achievement gaps. The toolkit also includes more than 30 synchronous and asynchronous webinars designed to guide teams of educators through key decisions. These sessions begin tomorrow and will continue throughout the remainder of the school year.

Thank you again for this opportunity to help inform the conversation. We recognize that addressing these inequities and mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic 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, educators, families, and communities. We look forward to continuing to work with the General Assembly and other stakeholders to serve the Commonwealth's students, educators, families, and communities. Thank you for your commitment to making education a shared priority. We will be happy to address any questions.