



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Educating K-12 Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Submitted to the
House Education Committee
February 23, 2021**

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Chairman Sonney, Chairman Longiotti, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for inviting PSEA to participate in today’s hearing. My name is Mark Spengler and I am a special education and learning support teacher at Emmaus High School in the East Penn School District located in Lehigh County. I am also an active member of my local union and PSEA. It is my honor to be here with you today to share my perspective and that of my fellow educators on what teaching and learning has been like during this pandemic.

As I was preparing my remarks for today, several words continued to circle in my mind:

Transformation

Exhaustion

Disengagement

Confirmation

Transformation.

Educators, students, and families have had to transform over this past year. Educators have had to redesign and redevelop every aspect of our craft – from planning and preparation of content to the modalities and technology for delivering instruction. Every interaction. Every assignment.

This transformation requires constant flexibility. It also requires constant resilience to manage our frustration and our grief at what this pandemic has taken from students and our own families.

This transformation is happening in homes too. I see our parents and guardians facing unreal challenges – navigating work and the everyday dynamics of families during a health crisis, all while supporting their child’s at-home learning and navigating realities of disparities in internet access. This takes its toll. I know personally since I am living the reality on both ends – I see it from the teacher perspective, but also as a parent. I have three daughters who are undergoing the challenges of virtual learning this year.

Exhaustion.

Educators are exhausted. Consistency is like oxygen to educators and this year has been anything but consistent. To say it hasn’t been easy to jump between instructional modes and adapt and shift pedagogical styles and strategies for a virtual setting – all while maintaining my regular responsibilities within special education that come with any school year – is the understatement of the decade.

Like many of you, I “meet” with students and colleagues by Zoom most days. But I also need to update IEPs, schedule and conduct IEP meetings with our teams and parents, and get people’s signatures on documents to ensure that we are compliant with federal special education laws and policies. I strategize every interaction with my students to see if I can engage them. The only thing that came off my plate this year is dealing with disciplinary issues with students. I miss hearing the little things that have captured the attention of students on any given day and what they are talking about in the hallways between classes.

Disengagement.

While this is not true for every student or every classroom, the reality is that most of our students are disengaged. This whole year has reinforced for me that there is nothing like face-to-face instruction. There's an energy and a level of accountability that comes with sitting with your peers and having a teacher in front of you directly engaging students. We're all doing our best, but the lack of consistency in education and varying instructional modes limit an educator's ability to help students be successful. Simply setting up students to be ready to learn is a process every day when they log on to the virtual platform. If we're lucky enough to have them in front of their computers, they need to understand how to access the information they'll need for the lesson. They might be looking in the wrong folder or they might be using the wrong operating system to access the materials they need. Technology fails. It's a process every single day.

Confirmation.

Public education has transformed in so many ways this past year. Most likely, it will never again look exactly like it did on March 13, 2020. There have been many challenges this past year, but also learning opportunities for me as a veteran educator. **And the experiences of this past year have provided me and my fellow educators with *confirmation of these four truths*:**

1. Our neighborhood public schools are indispensable for the essential connections and supports students need for their social, emotional, and academic well-being.

The lack of 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. We know that students will need extensive, intensive social and emotional learning and academic remediation to recover from this shared trauma. It is not hyperbole or an overstatement to say that the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of our students is at risk – in the immediate future, and in the long-term. Overcoming this risk will require greater access to caring, knowledgeable, highly trained professionals - educators, teaching assistants, nurses, counselors, school psychologists, and social workers.

We have all been focused on keeping students and educators safe from the virus. However, we're at that point where we must adjust our focus and prioritize the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students and educators – *while still maintaining the health and safety of our facilities and practices*. The pandemic not only served to spotlight the pre-existing gaps among our students' resources and academic and social challenges, but created a greater crisis for us all to manage moving forward.

2. Our public schools are THE social, economic, and educational connective centers for our local communities.

The economic recovery of this Commonwealth is inextricably linked to the ability of our schools to safely reopen and *stay open*.

My fellow educators and I want nothing more than to return to full-time in-person learning, but only when it can be done in a way that ensures the health and safety of students and staff. To do that requires the consistent implementation of essential mitigation strategies, such as those most recently recommended by the CDC and attested to by school districts in November.

The CDC guidance is clear. Certain practices - universal masking, at least six feet of social distancing from people not in your family, washing hands, avoiding poorly ventilated indoor spaces particularly for long periods of time (like a whole school day) - coupled with effective quarantine and contact tracing procedures, rapid testing, and urgent efforts to vaccinate more people - can help keep everyone safe.

But we all know that the CDC guidance and the PDE strategies attested to by districts are not applied universally in every school and every community in Pennsylvania. In some schools and communities this is due in part to different ideologies, interpretations, and enforcement for practicing these safety measures. For a lot of schools, though, universal compliance with CDC guidance isn't possible due to insufficient resources to address critical infrastructure like buildings that aren't large enough to provide for six feet of separation between students in classrooms, or ventilation systems that are severely outdated and cost-prohibitive to retrofit or fix.

This reality makes prioritizing vaccinations for school employees even more urgent to put Pennsylvania on a better path for economic recovery. And while vaccinations can be a game-changer for returning to in-person learning, Pennsylvania is not on a clear path for vaccinating teachers and staff who work directly with students – *not in the next month and maybe not even for the beginning of the next school year*. Pennsylvania must establish an intentional strategy that is comprehensive, transparent, and efficient to provide the vaccinations to educators as supply continues to increase.

3. The pandemic has exacerbated the disparities and inequities that have existed for too long in and among our communities.

Severe disparities in access to learning opportunities have existed for long before the ravaging effects of COVID-19. But we don't need standardized test results to show us that students from low-income communities and communities of color have suffered disproportionate impacts from the pandemic. We know that students in these communities are most likely to have lost a family member due to the pandemic, and most likely to have experienced food and housing insecurity and other economic hardships arising from a parent's job loss. They are the least likely to have had access to technology and in-home setups and supports necessary for successful distance learning.

It is essential that Pennsylvania adopt an intentional and comprehensive approach to help our schools address lost learning time and prevent students - particularly those in at-risk populations like my special education students – from falling any further behind. This approach to remediation for students, however, cannot be done in the same manner as after adoption of the Ch. 4 regulations back in 2014. Big study halls of kids sitting in front of computers will not work. The growing levels of student disengagement from learning during this pandemic, with a heavy if not singular emphasis on remote learning, makes clear to me and my fellow educators that in-person learning is essential for the vast majority of students, and that we need real strategies and support to ensure that quality remediation occurs. It is essential that educators are fully engaged in the planning, design, and implementation of supporting students as they work to catch up from lost learning time.

4. The educator shortage was severe before the pandemic. It is now a full-blown crisis.

For Pennsylvania to not only survive this crisis but to thrive in the years and decades that follow, all our students need access to quality educational opportunities. That cannot happen without enough caring, committed, highly qualified professionals – ideally connected to their community – supporting students in our classrooms and schools all across the Commonwealth.

Even prior to the pandemic, one of the biggest challenges we collectively faced in education was the growing shortage of educators and support professionals in Pennsylvania. The shortage is more dire when viewed through the lens of diversity and equity in our education workforce. The steep decline in the number of graduates choosing to be educators and the continued increase in the number of educators who leave the profession prior to retirement are alarming. Educator burnout was happening prior to coronavirus and knowing what the last year has been like for teachers, we fully expect to see another exodus of people from the profession.

Pennsylvania must make addressing the educator shortage a top priority. Demonstrating respect and value for school employees – including ensuring real accountability for following mitigation efforts and an intentional strategy to vaccinate school staff - is a foundational first step.

Thank you again for inviting PSEA to testify. We are committed to working in partnership with you. We know we need to get this right. The actions we collectively take today and in the coming weeks matter and will have implications far beyond addressing this immediate crisis of reopening our schools. It will demonstrate to people that public education is a priority. It will demonstrate to current – and hopefully future – educators and support staff that the work they do is valued and respected.