



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Proposed FY 24-25 state budget**

**Presented to the
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By

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Good morning, Chairman Bizzarro, Rep. Friel Otten, and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Dr. Pamela Brown, and I am an Instructional Support teacher for grades 5 and 6 at Hopewell Elementary School in the Oxford Area School District. I also have the honor of serving as President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) Southeastern Region, which is comprised of Chester, Delaware, and Philadelphia counties. Thank you for inviting PSEA to present testimony today regarding Governor Shapiro’s proposed FY 24-25 state budget, and concurrently the recommendations made by the Basic Education Funding Commission (BEFC or Commission) in early January.

Student Teacher Stipend

Before I discuss the Governor’s historic budget proposal designed to bring Pennsylvania’s school funding system into constitutional compliance, I want to first express my gratitude to Rep. Friel Otten for her work and leadership in addressing the educator shortage – specifically in the creation of a student teacher stipend program. It was almost exactly one year ago that, during a simple conversation over dinner, we discussed our shared commitment to student teachers. Subsequent efforts resulted in the introduction of House Bill 1331 – the Educator Pipeline Support Grant Program – which was also included in Act 33 of 2023 (the omnibus School Code bill).

The traditional 12 weeks of student teaching, which is required before a candidate can earn their teaching certificate, is an *unpaid clinical field experience*. For both traditional and non-traditional students (including individuals who are interested in pursuing teaching as a second career), a lack of income for three months is often not feasible, especially for those living independently and/or lacking family support. This costly, but crucial, requirement is a dropping-off point for too many future educators. And for many aspiring educators who do persevere, their options for an internship location are often limited - requiring them to travel great distances from their home or university to complete their clinical field experiences.

These realities of the student-teaching requirement do not reflect the current economic conditions of our society, and they certainly don’t consider the need to support adults with families who might want to transition to education as a second career.

The Educator Pipeline Support Grant program will provide:

- A \$10,000 stipend for student teachers.
- An additional \$5,000 for student teachers who choose to do their field experience in a high-vacancy school district.
- A \$2,500 stipend for cooperating teachers who provide supervision and counsel to student teachers.

Currently, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) is [preparing for the rollout](#) of this new student teacher support program. PSEA anticipates that in early April the application to receive a stipend will be made available for prospective educators who are scheduled to have a student teacher experience in either the fall of 2024 or spring of 2025. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) projects that there will be 1,400 student teachers in the fall and 3,600 in the spring. To be eligible for the stipend, a prospective teacher must comply with various requirements, including making a commitment to teach in a Pennsylvania public or nonpublic school for three years.

The FY 23-24 state budget committed \$10 million for the program. Based on PDE's projections, PHEAA will not be able to fund all student teacher stipend requests this fall. Governor Shapiro recognized the value of the student teacher stipend as a strategy to combat the educator shortage crisis and has proposed an additional \$15 million for FY 24-25. And while we are grateful for this recognition and increased commitment to the program, I would be remiss if I didn't highlight that \$25 million is far below projections of the amount needed to fully fund every student teacher experience next year and on an annual basis thereafter.

PSEA Estimates for Educator Pipeline Program:

- Fall 2024 Student Teacher Need - \$14 million
- Fall 2024 Cooperating Teacher Need - \$3.5 million
- Spring 2025 Student Teacher Need - \$36 million
- Spring 2025 Cooperating Teacher Need - \$9 million
- **Minimum Total Budget Need - \$62.5 million**

***Note – this estimate does not include a projected cost for the \$5,000 incentive bonus for student teachers who choose to do their field experience in a high-vacancy school. If policymakers assume 1,000 student teachers choose to do their student teacher experience in a high-vacancy school, this will add an additional \$5 million to the program estimate.*

Pennsylvania has made notable progress over the last twelve months to confront a key barrier to becoming a teacher. But we must finish the job. PSEA urges lawmakers to not only support the Governor's proposal, but to increase funding for the student teacher stipend by an additional \$50 million. A *total* investment of \$75 million for this critically important program in the final FY 24-25 budget must be a priority. A \$75 million investment is also consistent with the recommendation of the Commission. With billions of dollars in our Rainy Day Fund, the commonwealth can clearly afford an additional \$50 million in FY 24-25 for the Educator Pipeline program. No single student teacher should be excluded from receiving a stipend due to lack of funds.

Basic Education Funding

In August 2019, I testified before this very committee regarding fair education funding. I discussed how the Commonwealth needed to increase the amount of new money available to schools and distribute those dollars via the basic education funding formula. Additionally, I counseled policymakers to set aside the idea of driving the entire basic education subsidy through the formula, and explained how such a proposal would have negative consequences, such as costing Coatesville 18 percent of its basic education funding.

Today, I feel like this is a full circle moment. Since 2020-21, the General Assembly invested \$1.6 billion in basic education. I know that all of you played a large part in making that happen, and I thank you. But that's not all. In 2023, the Commonwealth Court ruled that Pennsylvania's school funding system is unconstitutional and in January of this year, the Commission recommended a seven-year plan to bring our state funding system into constitutional compliance. Governor Shapiro made good on his promise to respond to the Court's ruling by including the Commission's year-one funding allocation in his proposed FY 24-25 state budget. These are all very positive steps for students, schools, and educators.

There are two aspects of the Commission report and Governor Shapiro's basic education budget proposal that I'd like to comment on:

Predictability and Stability – Predictable and stable base funding is important for school administrators when they consider long-term investments like starting new programs and hiring new staff. The Commission proposes to improve the BEF formula by reducing volatility in formula shares without sacrificing the formula's dynamic ability to respond to student needs and unique district conditions. Greater predictability and stability are accomplished by using a three-year average in the poverty count, poverty concentration metric, median household income index, and local effort capacity index. Additionally, the base year is reset to FY 23-24. Updating the base year creates balance between consistent, predictable funding and the more dynamic funding allocated through the formula. And because the base would include ten years of formula driven dollars, it is more equitable, too.

Adequacy Targets – The Court's ruling highlighted specific "inputs" that are essential to afford students the opportunity to meet State-determined "outcomes" - with funding as the foundational input for all other inputs.¹ *Districts cannot hire more teachers, remodel buildings, purchase new school curricula, or offer better technology and classroom supplies without the money to pay for them.* Therefore, the question isn't *whether* more funding is needed, but *how much*. PSEA and other stakeholders believe the Court's ruling requires policymakers to develop and implement a statewide funding plan, so districts also can plan for increased investments and how they should use such

¹ William Penn School District, et al. v. Pa. Department of Education, et al., 294 A.3d 537, 909 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2023)

funding to address those court-identified inputs. PSEA was pleased to see that the Commission proposed a seven-year plan that included the calculation of adequacy targets.

According to the Commission’s methodology, 387 school districts have an adequacy gap totaling \$5.1 billion, while 113 are spending at or above their adequacy target (\$13,704 per weighted student). In PSEA’s Southeast Region, there are 14 districts with an adequacy gap including William Penn, Upper Darby, Southeast Delco, Chester Upland, Avon Grove, Coatesville, Oxford Area, Philadelphia, and several others. This region also includes 14 school districts without an adequacy gap. Additionally, there are 18 school districts in this region identified as high tax effort, which would receive a share of a \$951 million tax equity supplement under the BEFC proposal. All school districts would realize increased state funding through the proposed \$200 million added to the basic education funding formula.

PSEA believes this funding methodology is reasonable and appropriately responds to the Commonwealth Court ruling. All districts would benefit from improving funding stability and predictability, as well as from distributing \$200 million per year in new funding through the formula for seven years. Those who question the Commission’s recommendation along with Governor Shapiro’s proposed budget should recall the Court determined that - because of disparities – “students attending low-wealth districts are being deprived of equal protection of law.”² To rectify this unfairness, we must determine which districts are low-wealth and inadequately and/or inequitably funded. And as you can see in the map on page 8 of my testimony, the districts identified there as low wealth largely align with the districts identified as needing substantial adequacy investments.

Additional Considerations

Accountability/Guardrails for New Funding

PSEA would offer three recommendations to further improve the basic education funding proposal as FY 24-25 budget deliberations begin. First, when the state commits billions more to close adequacy gaps for districts, it is reasonable to seek greater accountability for how those funds are invested. PSEA members want to ensure this additional funding is invested in evidence-based programs and strategies connected to the inputs identified by the Court and tailored to meet the needs of their students. And PSEA’s members want to be consulted by administrators on how districts should invest significant new dollars specifically in their buildings.

Educators and researchers concur there are evidence-based strategies and programs proven to improve educational outcomes for students. Pennsylvania should ensure districts are utilizing these strategies, provided by certified and well-trained professionals, and made available to ALL students who need them. Evidence-based strategies and programs include, for example, pre-kindergarten; full-day kindergarten; a sufficient number of reading and math specialists who can intervene and provide

² Id. at 965.

one-on-one supports to students who are struggling; continuous resources and programs supporting students' emotional and social well-being; early literacy curriculum and educator training based on the science of reading; after-school programs; tutoring; small group instruction, more personalized learning, and smaller class sizes; experienced teachers providing instruction in the subject area for which they are certified; social and emotional support services delivered via certified school social workers, psychologists, counselors, and nurses at ratios that reflect best practice; and many more.³

Educator Shortage

One of the unavoidable issues that school officials will inevitably confront when implementing any evidence-based strategy – including those identified by the Commission's Minority Report – is its interconnectedness with the educator shortage. There is a limit to how much new curriculum, textbooks, data systems, and/or professional development can accomplish. *Without an adequate supply of well-trained, qualified educators and staff, Pennsylvania cannot ensure a constitutional system of public education.*

During the period 2012 through 2023, there has been a 75 percent decline in the number of Instructional I certificates issued to in-state graduates. During that same period, there has been a 424 percent increase in the number of emergency permits issued. This crisis has impacts across the Commonwealth – but most acutely in our low-wealth and poorest districts. The Commonwealth is not producing enough teachers, mental health professionals, or paraprofessionals to meet demand.

And while it is challenging to hire teachers in the current environment, schools are finding it nearly impossible to hire support staff. These individuals are essential for supporting the whole child in their learning – doing everything from transporting them safely to and from school, providing additional supports in the classroom, maintaining their schools and facilities, and making sure they have a healthy breakfast and lunch.

Consider that a teacher's aide in a special needs classroom, for example, faces some of the most difficult work imaginable. Their jobs are physical and demanding, require enormous compassion, and often involve students with severe physical and intellectual disabilities. They are often times punched, kicked, or bitten. The Commonwealth cannot say that it values our support professionals and the important work they do in supporting students while districts pay them poverty wages.

³ Id. at 598-602.

Starting Teacher Salaries – PSEA Southeastern Region 2022-23 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	COUNTY	REGION	CONTRACT YEAR	STARTING SALARY
Coatesville Area	CHESTER	SE	2021-22	47,000
Upper Darby	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	47,472
Chester-Upland	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	48,400
Philadelphia City	PHILADELPHIA	SE	2022-23	48,490
Ridley	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	48,822
Avon Grove	CHESTER	SE	2021-22	48,985
Marple Newtown	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	49,500
William Penn	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	49,674
Southeast Delco	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	49,968
Chichester	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	50,427
Garnet Valley	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	50,549
Phoenixville Area	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	50,944
Oxford Area	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	51,058
Unionville-Chadds Ford	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	51,155
Kennett Consolidated	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	51,234
Interboro	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	51,242
West Chester Area	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	51,670
Owen J. Roberts	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	52,000
Radnor Twp.	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	52,450
Wallingford-Swarthmore	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	52,500
Penn Delco	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	53,013
Springfield	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	53,348
Octorara Area	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	54,416
Downingtown Area	CHESTER	SE	2021-22	54,846
Rose Tree Media	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	54,900
Haverford Twp	DELAWARE	SE	2022-23	54,981
Tredyffrin-Easttown	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	55,542
Great Vally	CHESTER	SE	2022-23	59,285

Compiled by PSEA Research – June 2023.

One of the reasons it is difficult to recruit teachers is due to low wages. Compensation is a critical factor in people’s evaluation of the profession. School districts should be required to invest new state funding in raising the minimum educator salary to \$60,000 and the wages of support professionals to no less than \$20 per hour or a living wage. Strategies like increasing class-size or making support professionals’ jobs part-time, so districts don’t have to pay benefits, are part of the reason people don’t want to work in public education. It’s time to invest in the educator workforce, because that’s how we have more academic programs, happier school employees, and ultimately a better system for our students.

Charter School Tuition

Finally, as the state increases basic education funding and districts spend more to close adequacy gaps, districts’ charter tuition payments to brick-and-mortar charter schools and cyber charter schools will correspondingly increase. School districts’ charter tuition payments are based on their expenditures. Therefore, increasing basic education funding will contribute to the endless cycle of

school districts simply acting as pass-through entities for state funding to charter and cyber charter schools.

That won't solve the problem.

Therefore, part of the budget deliberation process should resolve how to prevent new adequacy payments from driving astronomical increases in charter tuition. The Commission's Majority Report identified three possible strategies, including: reinstating charter school reimbursement funding; establishing a standard cyber charter rate; and amending the PDE-363 (the form used to calculate charter school tuition payments). PSEA looks forward to being part of those discussions to determine the best way forward. PSEA has members in both charter and cyber charter schools. We also have members in Chester-Upland School District, whose budget has been steadily and increasingly consumed by charter school tuition over the last twenty years. I believe we can find a way forward that respects all public schools but acknowledges and prevents profiteering by the charter system.

Conclusion

The journey to greater school funding equity and adequacy has been difficult, but as a teacher providing instructional support every day in classrooms, I can tell you that every single one of these fights that you as elected officials take on is worth it -- no matter how long it takes. Thank you for your steadfast support of your public schools. I'll be happy to answer any questions.



