COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

SENATOR
KRISTIN PHILLIPS-HILL
CO-CHAIR

REPRESENTATIVE
MIKE STURLA
CO-CHAIR

BASIC EDUCATION FUNDING COMMISSION

HEARING AGENDA
October 5, 2023 – 10AM
Hazleton Area School District Administration Building
Hazleton, PA

10:00 a.m.	Call to Order and Opening Remarks Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill, 28th Senatorial District Rep. Mike Sturla, 96th Legislative District Sen. Dave Argall, 29th Senatorial District
10:10 a.m.	Pennsylvania School Boards Association Kevin Busher, Chief Advocacy Officer (zoom)
10:25 a.m.	Questions & Answers
10:45 a.m.	AIA-Pennsylvania Michael Kelly, Principal of Design, KCBA Architects
11:00 a.m.	Questions & Answers
11:20 a.m.	Brian Uplinger, Superintendent, Hazleton School District
11:30 a.m.	Questions & Answers
11:45 a.m.	Victor Perez, President, La Casa Dominicana de Hazleton Inc.
11:50 a.m.	Questions & Answers
12:00 p.m.	Bob Curry, Co-Founder, Hazleton Integration Project Rossanna Gabriel, Executive Director, Hazleton Integration Project
12:10 p.m.	Questions & Answers
12:20 p.m.	IFO Survey Vote
12:30 p.m.	Closing Remarks and Adjournment

TESTIMONY OF THE

PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE BASIC EDUCATION FUNDING COMMISSION

OCTOBER 5, 2023

KEVIN BUSHER

PSBA CHIEF ADVOCACY OFFICER

Chairwoman Phillips-Hill, Chairman Sturla, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to testify today on behalf of the 5,000 local public school leaders we represent. My name is Kevin Busher and I am not only the Chief Advocacy Officer for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, but also a former nine-year veteran of the Lower Dauphin School Board in Dauphin County.

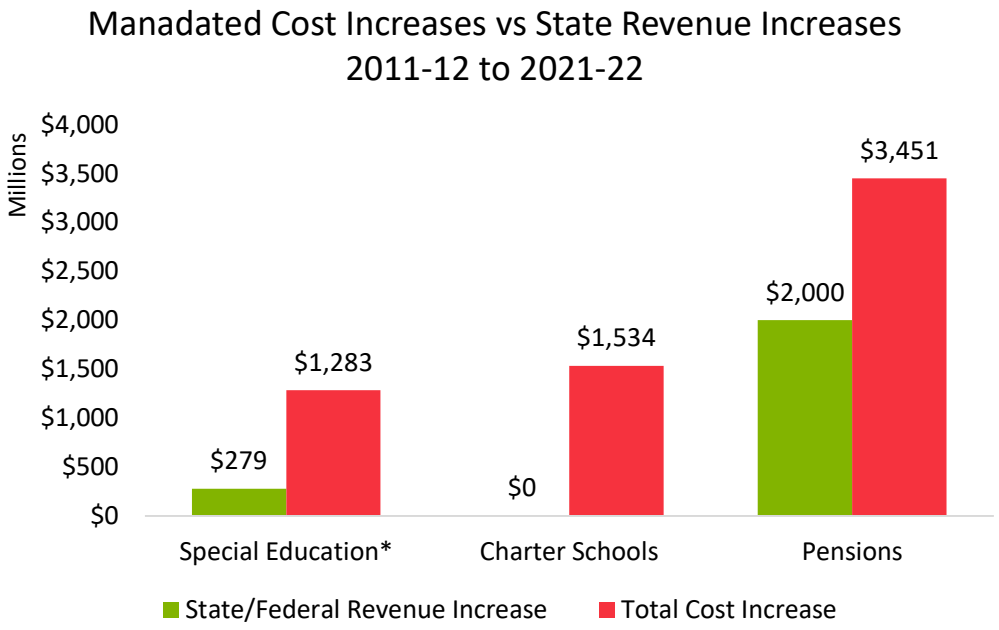
This commission and the education community are in an incredibly unique position in Pennsylvania's history concerning public education. Since the Commonwealth Court issued its landmark ruling finding Pennsylvania's system of public education unconstitutional, we find ourselves with a virtual clean slate as to what the future of public education could look like in Pennsylvania. Today, I'd like to share PSBA's view on what that future may look like.

I wanted to start by first addressing some of the misconceptions out there about education funding before getting into some specific areas of particular interest for PSBA members and recommendations for the Commission.

You've all heard how much Pennsylvania schools spend per student and that PA ranks in the top 10 for education spending. But if you look a little deeper into the data to examine WHY those numbers are what they are you'll see that school leaders have little, if any, control over most of that spending because of mandated costs.

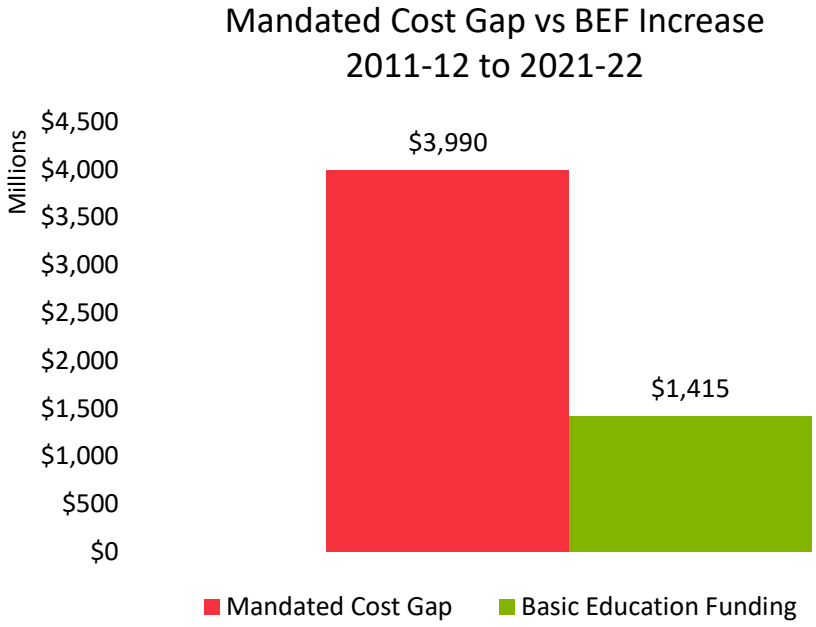
You're also likely familiar with the historic increases in basic education funding over the last few years and yet public education advocates are still asking for more state funding for public education.

While these increases are extremely welcome, they pale in comparison to increases in mandated costs for pensions, charter school tuition, and special education. These three mandated costs alone have been the primary cause for increases in education spending over the last decade. Combined, those costs have increased by more than $6.2 billion over the last decade while state revenue intended to help pay those costs has only increased by more than $2.2 billion. That leaves schools with a nearly $4 billion mandated cost gap to fill.

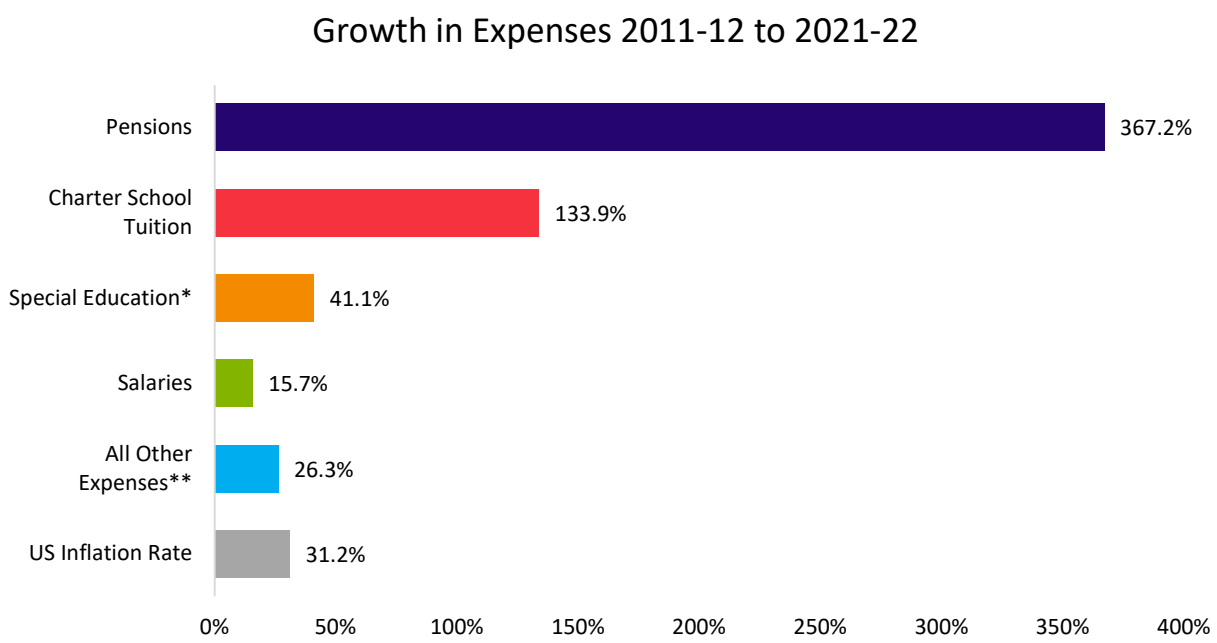


* Does not include pension and charter tuition costs attributable to special education

Even if public schools used every single dollar of Basic Education Funding increase to help pay those costs, we would still see a mandated cost gap of more than $2.5 billion.

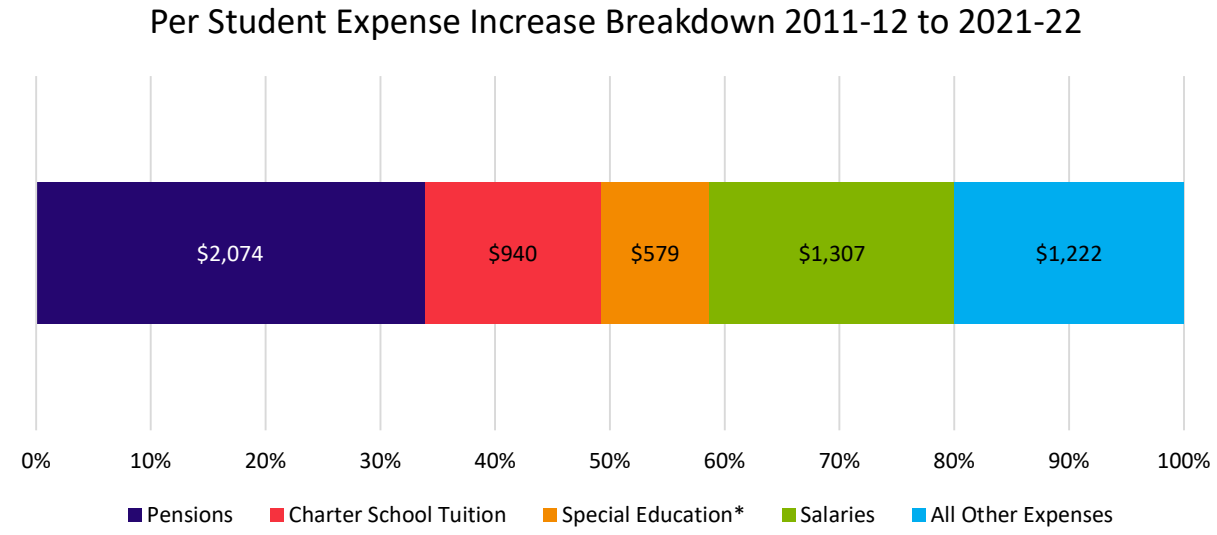


When we compare increases in mandated costs to all other types of school district expenditures, we see clearly that districts are doing an excellent job controlling the costs that they can control. Aside from increases in pensions, charter school tuition, and special education, districts have kept increases in other types of spending below the rate of inflation.



* Does not include pension, charter school, and salary costs attributable to special education
** These exclude fund transfers and debt service payments

When we look at increases in spending from a per-student perspective we see that mandated cost increases for pensions, charter school tuition, and special education account for nearly 60% of the roughly $6,000 increase in expenses per student that has occurred over the last decade.

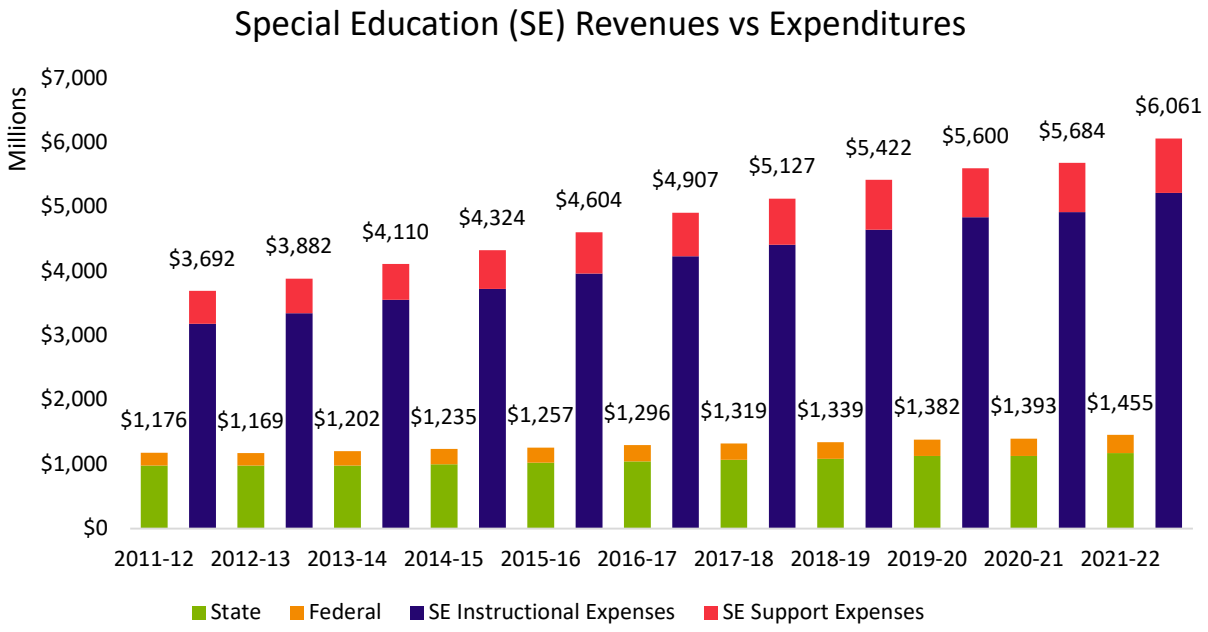


* Does not include pension, charter school, and salary costs attributable to special education

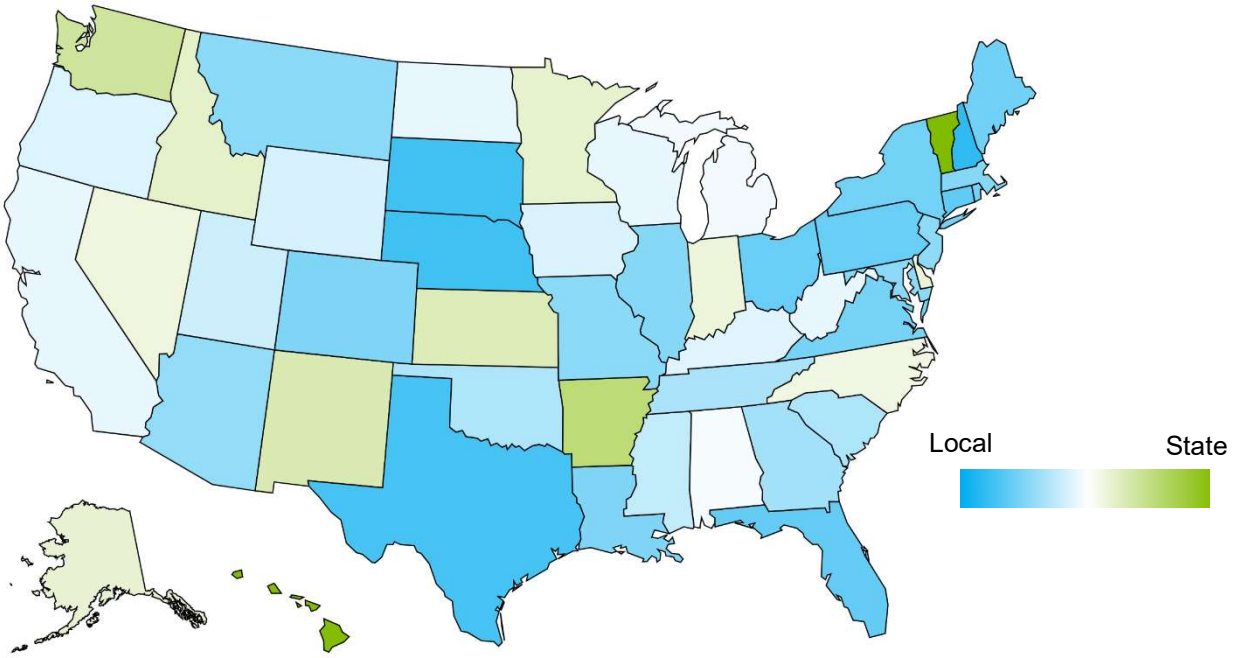
Although there is a separate Commission set up to consider special education funding, the topic is nonetheless relevant to helping understand the complete financial picture facing school districts. It is also important to note that the mandate to provide students with disabilities a “free appropriate public education”, or “FAPE” comes from the federal

government, yet Congress has failed to live up to their promise to fully fund the mandate they placed on public schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

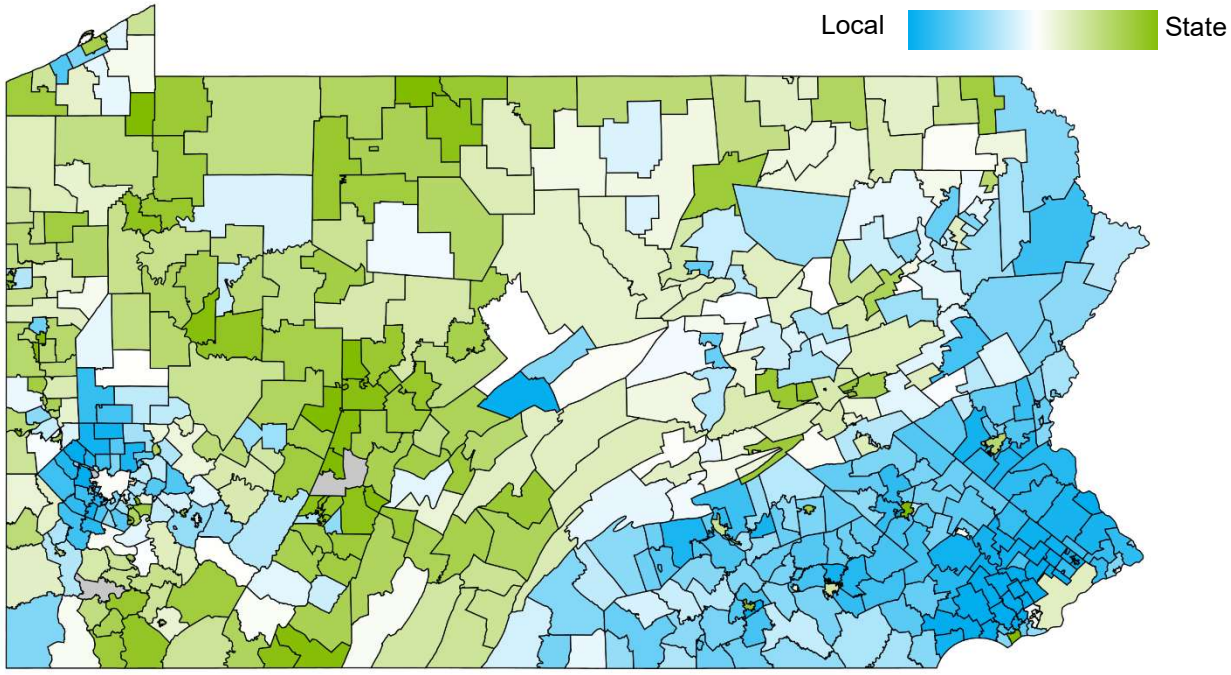
In 2011-12, 32% of all special education expenditures were covered by state and federal funding. By 2021-22 that percentage had dropped to just 24% due to mandatory special education costs increasing by nearly $2.4 billion while revenues intended to help cover those costs only increased by $278.5 million.



Statewide, only about 37% of education revenues come from the state. Only eight other states have a lower percentage of education revenues coming from the state.



However, when we look at school districts individually, we see a very diverse picture. In rural and urban parts of the state, we see a reliance on the state for education revenues while in suburban areas we see a reliance on local sources.



This diversity was one of the keys to the Commonwealth Court's ruling. In many of the suburban school districts, property values and income levels were sufficient enough to pay the mandated cost gap and still be able to invest in classrooms, while in rural and urban areas, many of those school districts did not have resources to invest in educational programs and services after paying for the mandated cost gap, thus contributing to an education system consisting of the haves and have nots.

Recommendation #1 School Infrastructure

The current system of funding public education also results in very different means for improving and addressing school infrastructure needs which is why the state needs to begin funding the PlanCon program passed into law in 2019 or funding on a recurring basis a facilities construction, renovation, maintenance, and remediation program. This gives school leaders predicable funding for long term facilities planning.

Based on PSBA's most recent State of Education report, nearly three-quarters of school districts reported having at least one school building in need of major repairs or replacement. And the lack of a state reimbursement program was a major obstacle for construction and renovation projects with 70%of school districts reporting that they have postponed construction or renovation projects due to a lack of state reimbursement.

This is not just an urban issue. Across the state school buildings are deteriorating and becoming obsolete. Yet most communities simply do not have the resources to undertake a major school construction or renovation project without the state's help. We all saw or heard the stories about some schools being forced to close or alter their school days because of the heat at the start of the school year. We've also heard stories about mold, leaky roofs, chipping paint, and more. Yet in many school districts, the resources to address these issues simply are not there or they are forced to make difficult choices between improving their educational program or making repairs to their school buildings.

We also know that schools are looking to become more energy efficient by moving to solar power. However, many schools simply lack the resources needed to make the upfront investment needed to install solar panels. We would encourage the state to make funding available to help school districts make the investment in energy efficiency which will provide the districts and their taxpayers with long-term savings.

Recommendation #2 Mental Health and School Safety

Two of the biggest challenges facing public education today are addressing the mental health needs of students and providing a safe and healthy learning environment.

In the 2023 State of Education report, addressing student mental health needs was identified as one of the biggest challenges school leaders faced in the 2022-23 school year. Unfortunately, this need is not going to go away anytime soon. School leaders anticipate student mental health issues to be present for the foreseeable future. Investments made in the last several state budgets have been crucial to helping schools address those needs. More than 81% of school districts reported being able to provide their students with additional mental health supports that they would not have been able to provide without the state resources being available in the 2022 budget.

School leaders, as well as students and parents, are also concerned with the safety and security of their local public school. The work of the School Safety and Security Committee has gone a long way in giving schools needed guidance to make decisions on the best ways to secure their school buildings. However, schools continue to need resources to implement those strategies.

We urge the Commission to keep the needs for student mental health and school safety and security in mind during their discussions. Creating additional barriers for school leaders to access these funds in a locally directed manner will result in delayed services. This is why we ask that local school leaders maintain the authority to see that the mental health needs as well as the safety and security of their school buildings can be addressed in a manner consistent with the beliefs of their community.

Recommendation #3 Community Engaged Schools

There has been a lot of discussion lately about the best way to help students attending struggling schools. Creating a voucher program similar to the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit program, or OSTC, which currently exists to provide scholarships to eligible students residing within the boundaries of a low-achieving school to attend another public school outside of their district or nonpublic school.

However, adding a duplicative scholarship program does not identify or address the barriers to achievement that are present in communities with struggling schools. That is precisely what the community engaged school model is intended to do.

Last legislative session's attempt at creating a voucher program was amended to include charter schools in the list of low-achieving schools. When charter schools were added, half of all charter schools in operation would have made the list of low-achieving schools. This indicates that something other than educational options are present in these communities which act as barriers to achievement, and solutions intended to identify and address these barriers need to be explored to help all students and families in those communities.

The community engaged school model is built with the understanding that students often come to the classroom with challenges that impact their ability to learn, explore, and develop to their greatest potential.

Community engaged schools focus on what students in the community truly need to succeed—whether it's access to free healthy meals, health care, tutoring, mental health counseling, or other tailored services before, during, and after school. Community engaged schools identify these needs and then bring together academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.

A piece of the future of public education funding in Pennsylvania should include finances to fund the proven community engaged schools model.

Recommendation #4 Mandate Relief

School districts are required to comply with hundreds of individual mandates. Considered separately, many mandates can be defended as implementing important policy objectives or as sincere efforts to enhance the quality of education, student

achievement, health, safety and wellness, accountability, transparency and the efficient expenditure of taxpayer money. Taken as a whole, however, mandates can create unwieldy and burdensome requirements, drain money away from classrooms, result in higher property taxes, and negatively impact local decision-making because they either dictate in considerable detail the actions to be taken or severely limit available options.

Although the state imposes many mandates, the state only sometimes contributes toward the cost of compliance. Those contributions typically do not keep pace with escalating costs and in some cases state funding has completely disappeared, leaving local school districts, and their taxpayers, to assume the burden of an ever-increasing share of the costs required to comply with the mandates.

Most mandates are unfunded, in that the state imposes a requirement on schools, but does not contribute funding to specifically assist schools in paying the costs associated with compliance.

However, mandate relief also provides the General Assembly with opportunities to provide resources for public education without appropriating more funds. Here are three examples where mandate relief would do just that:

- Repeal requirements that force school districts to go through drawn out and unnecessary processes to contract with a third-party vendor.
- Enact Right-to-Know law reforms which allow school districts to recoup some of the costs associated with complying with requests made for a commercial purpose. And provide schools with an avenue to obtain relief from requesters who use the law as a weapon or means to harass the district.
- Provide school districts with a flexible menu of options to advertise public notices as opposed to being limited to using printed newspapers to satisfy legal obligations to notify the public.

<u>Recommendation #5 Charter School Reform</u>

A common theme throughout testimony to the Commission from school leaders has been the impacts of mandated charter school tuition on school district finances, which should not come as a surprise. Over the last several years, charter school tuition has been identified as the most common source of budget pressure for school districts and more than 93% of locally elected school boards have passed resolutions calling for charter reform.

It's important to note that none of the 466 resolutions call for the elimination of charter schools or school choice. However, what school leaders are calling for is a fair funding mechanism and a level playing field for all types of public schools.

The 26-year-old funding mechanism for charter schools contains a number of flaws which results in school districts overpaying charter schools, particularly when it comes to cyber charter school tuition and tuition for special education students.

Cyber charter schools receive the same tuition payment from school districts as brick-and-mortar charter schools despite not having the same level of expenses as their brick-and-mortar colleagues, particularly when it comes to school buildings and

infrastructure. Although cyber charters incur costs for shipping educational materials to students and for finding space to administer state testing, those costs pale in comparison to the costs of maintaining a physical school building. Plus, school districts are required by law to provide cyber charter schools with access to district facilities for the administration of state assessments.

The charter school tuition payments calculated by school districts are based on the districts' expenses and bear no relation to the costs needed by the cyber charter schools to provide their online educational program. This is particularly problematic in relation to cyber charter schools because the tuition rate calculation includes several school district expenses that cyber charter schools just do not have. For example, cyber charter schools do not incur costs related to tax assessment and collection and providing support services to private schools, nor do they incur costs to the extent school districts do for extracurricular activities, food services, debt service, health services and infrastructure.

Because each school district calculates its own unique tuition rates based on the school district's expenses, this results in vastly different tuition rates being paid to the cyber charter school despite all students in the school being provided the same education.

The funding mechanism for special education students is also based on the school district's expenses for special education and not on what the charter school spends to educate its students with disabilities. This flaw is critical because school districts are responsible for educating almost all of the students with disabilities who require the most extensive special education services and supports – those costing more than $26,718 per student (as adjusted annually pursuant to School Code section 1372(8)). In 2020-21, more than 93% of the students requiring the most extensive special education services were educated by or through a school district.

In comparison, more than 93% of all charter school special education students were educated for less than $26,718. Yet, because the tuition calculation is based on the school district's expenses, the average charter school special education tuition rate paid to charters by districts was $28,553.

The result of this flaw is that school districts are overpaying charter schools for special education. Based on an analysis of 2020-21 PDE data, school districts paid charter schools $185.6 million more in special education tuition payments than the charter schools spent to provide special education services. Because charter schools are not obligated to use special education tuition solely for special education purposes, and there is no mechanism for school districts to seek repayment of unused funds, these overpayments are profit to the charter school.

Providing meaningful charter reform would allow school districts to maintain the necessary resources which they could then use to invest in their buildings and classrooms.

Final Thoughts

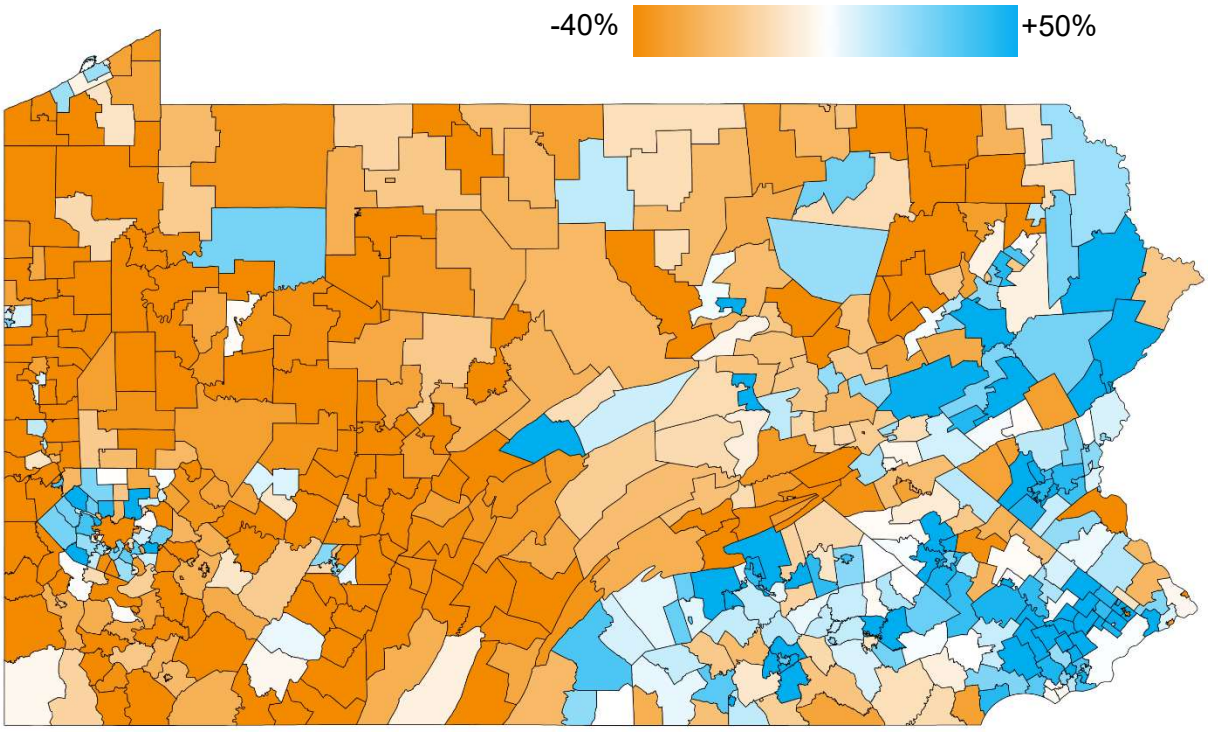
As the Commission continues to work towards its recommendations, we would like to ask that the Commission keep the following points in mind.

Do not end hold harmless immediately. Doing so would be catastrophic to hundreds of school districts. The original BEF Commission recognized that "eliminating the hold harmless clause would have a significant negative impact on many school districts across the Commonwealth that would be unable to make operational adjustments or generate revenue from other sources to make up for the loss of basic education funding." See Basic Education Funding Commission Report and Recommendations, page 68.

In the current 2023-24 fiscal year, running all BEF dollars through the formula would result in a little more than $1 billion being taken from 311 school districts and given to 189 districts. The loss of funding for those 311 districts varies, but 224 districts would see BEF reductions of more than 20% and 107 of those districts would see a reduction of more than 40%. As illustrated by the map below, rural areas would be especially impacted negatively.

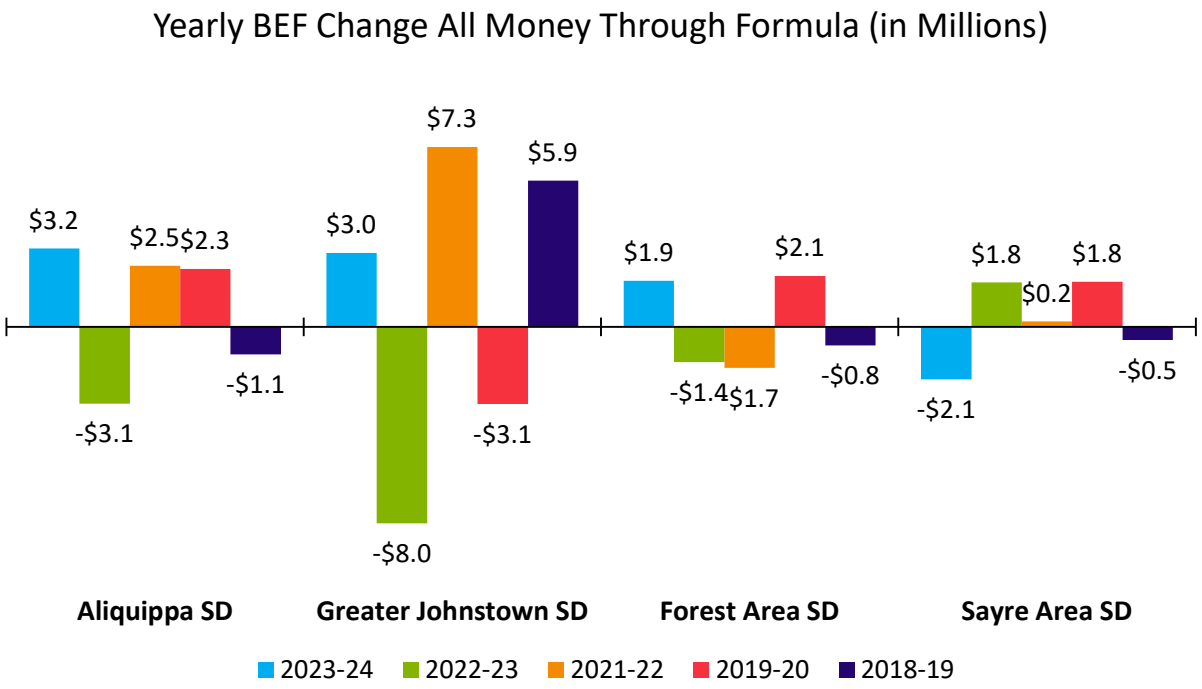
PSBA members have debated taking a position on eliminating hold harmless and our members overwhelmingly did not want to support a proposal which would harm more than 60% of school districts to benefit the other 30%.

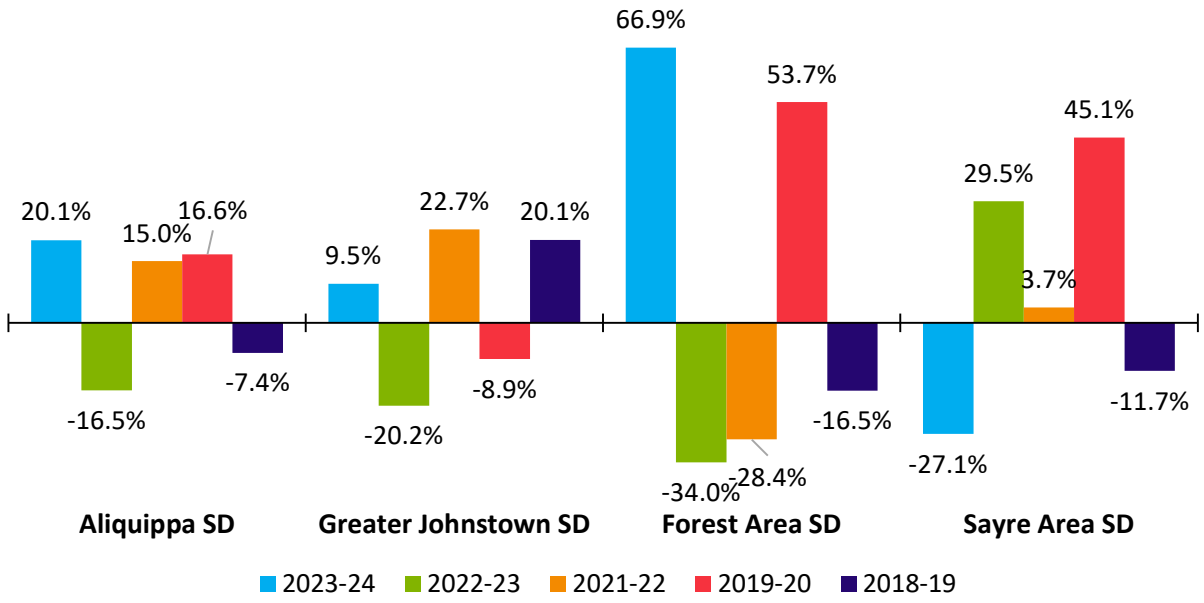
Change in BEF funding levels by running all BEF through the current formula.



Exercise caution in sending all BEF money through the formula. Running all BEF money through the formula would also present school districts with a new set of challenges. The current formula brings with it the possibility that formula factors for each district can change from one year to the next. While in some cases, those changes will benefit a district and bring more funding, they can also result in a reduction in the district's funding allocation. The impact of these annual fluctuations will only grow with the more money that goes through the formula.

To illustrate this point, if all $7.8 billion in the 2023-24 BEF budget line item ran through the formula each of the last 6 years (excluding 2020-21 where BEF for all districts was frozen at prior year's levels) we can see many instances where school districts would have experienced substantial volatility – both in terms of dollars received by the district and percentage of BEF funding – due to annual changes in formula factors. A few such examples are highlighted in the graphs below.





The large swings in BEF levels from one year to the next would force districts into very difficult predicaments. Due to Act 1 index limits, school districts may not be able to shift to property tax increases to cover the loss in state funding. If school districts could not make up the loss of state revenues locally, that only leaves the option of reducing programs and services to make up for the difference.

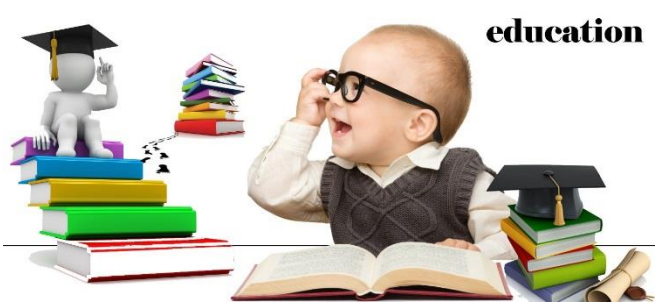
Not only would school districts be confronted with potentially large swings in their BEF funding from one year to the next, but they would not know about those swings until they are set to approve their own budgets. Formula factors for the upcoming year are currently not set in June, the same month school districts are required by law to approve their final budgets. Since those factors decide how much funding each school district will receive, districts could be confronted with substantial last-minute changes to their financial plans.

Do not mandate mergers or consolidations. The state should recognize that mergers and consolidations may not have significant financial savings. Rather than forcing school districts to merge or consolidate, the state should find ways to incentivize mergers, consolidations, and sharing of services by providing state financial support to overcome the most common financial barriers that school leaders encounter when considering these actions. If mergers and consolidations of school districts are considered by this Commission, we hope that it will be mindful of the original BEF Commission's consideration of this issue. In its final report, the original BEF Commission stated - "the cost of studying the impact of consolidation and differences in school districts' tax and debt situations can serve as an impediment to consolidation that may be reconcilable with some level of additional financial support." See Basic Education Funding Commission Report and Recommendations, page 68. Where school

leaders have chosen to consider merging or consolidating, additional state financial assistance could go a long way in studying and carrying out those plans.

Maintain local control over expenditures and revenues. Local control is one of the core tenets of public education in Pennsylvania. Locally elected and accountable school leaders are empowered to make decisions regarding taxation and spending in order to provide the educational programs that their local community deems necessary and desirable. Decisions regarding taxation and spending are not taken lightly by our school leaders and are some of the most difficult decisions they must make. Whether it's raising taxes on their friends and neighbors or investing public funds in new classrooms or curriculum, school directors weigh each decision and vote based on their conscience and beliefs. Our members would like to see this preserved in the Commission's work.

PSBA as a resource. While PSBA does not have all the solutions to the issues that face our public school communities PSBA, our members, and member affiliates stand ready to assist the Commission, General Assembly and Shapiro Administration to accomplish the monumental task of reshaping the public education system in-light-of the Commonwealth Court's landmark ruling.



October 5, 2023

Opening

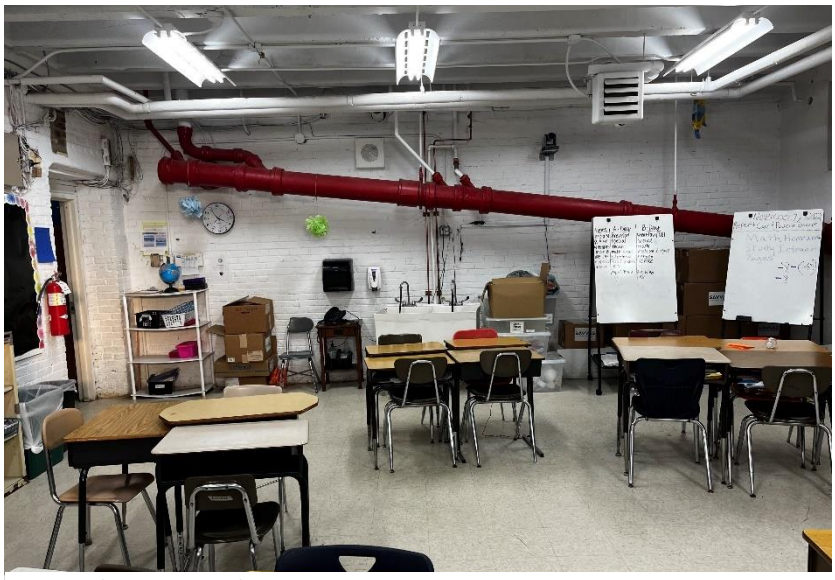
Good morning senators, representatives, and staff members. I would like to thank the Basic Education Funding Commission for having me here today.

My name is Michael Kelly. I am a registered architect in Pennsylvania, an accredited member of the Association for Learning Environments organization, and the architectural representative to the Governor's School Safety and Security Committee. I am the Principal of Design at KCBA Architects, a firm that specializes in Pennsylvania public school facilities. We have partnered with school districts from across the Commonwealth and are currently working on school upgrade initiatives in nine counties. I am also a proud 1993 graduate of The William Allen High School in Allentown and parent of two children currently enrolled in Pennsylvania public schools, so it is truly an honor to speak with you today.

Existing conditions of public school buildings

Seven years ago, I testified in front of the PA Public School Building Construction and Reconstruction Advisory Committee to talk about PlanCon and the program's critical role in maintaining appropriate learning environments for our children. I showed images of subpar learning environments in a variety of school districts where children were learning in poorly ventilated, windowless classrooms with outdated equipment. Unfortunately, many of these images still reflect today's conditions. I know this firsthand as I have visited hundreds of schools that have outdated, unhealthy, and often unsafe spaces that are hindering our children during a time when they should be feeling safe and excited to learn.

I am sure we can agree that all children should be provided a safe and nurturing environment for learning. We agree that a quality education is essential. But I can again tell you from personal experience that the conditions of our schools can drastically vary from one school district to another and sometimes from one school to another inside a school district.



Existing Classroom Conditions

Your zip code should not determine the quality of your education or the environment in which you learn. Public education exists to provide every student with an equal opportunity. But with school funding stretched so thin, too often building maintenance, safety, and quality fall short of modern standards. Our school districts desperately need funding to upgrade, repair, modernize, expand, and sometimes replace obsolete or inadequate buildings.

Existing Classroom Conditions

How big is the problem? How do we find out?

An essential part of the PlanCon process was a requirement for any school district seeking state funding to have completed a district-wide facilities study within two years of beginning any potential project. This ensured that school districts were evaluating multiple building options before making an investment. It required a list of all district owned property, the size of each building, the grade alignment that made up each building, and the year the building was constructed. Existing facilities conditions were evaluated as part of the report. An enrollment projection was also needed to evaluate a district's building capacity needs and what future growth or reductions should be considered. The study was to be conducted and certified by a Pennsylvania licensed architect chosen by the school district.

A Facilities Conditions Assessment (FCA) is a valuable tool and exercise ahead of any major investment in a building project. It is meant to study the physical conditions of school buildings but often does not consider the educational needs or academic limitations within the school. While it is certainly important that a school's roof doesn't leak, if the spaces underneath that roof are not an environment conducive to teaching and learning, then the building is not functioning well as a school. This is why simply evaluating only a building's HVAC system does not provide a full assessment of the facility. A knowledge of current building codes, modern safety standards, and the qualities of an educational environment are an essential part of any needs assessment.

Collaborative process of a district-wide facilities study

It is critical that school districts can choose their facilities study partners. There are many well qualified architectural firms here in Pennsylvania that specialize in education design. Typically, a school district will interview several firms and then choose the team that best aligns with their values, goals, and process. The most successful studies are truly a collaborative process with many representatives of a district.

Understanding the statewide scale of these issues is a reasonable request. However, the cost and time it would take for any singular entity to study every school building within Pennsylvania's 501 school districts would be enormous. And we know the results already; there are A LOT of building needs in our school districts. So instead, the Department of Education could consider a survey of our districts to inquire about the number of buildings they have, the size and age of each, and how many students each building serves. Additional inquiries could ask when they last conducted a facilities study, if they are planning for any building improvements in the next five years, and which area of focus they find the most needed (building infrastructure, school safety, modernizing educational spaces, ect.). There is no question that many Pennsylvania school districts have critical building issues and lack the funding to address them. Fortunately, the adopted PlanCon 2.0 already has the necessary means to distribute funding assistance and the requirement that a district-wide facilities study be completed.

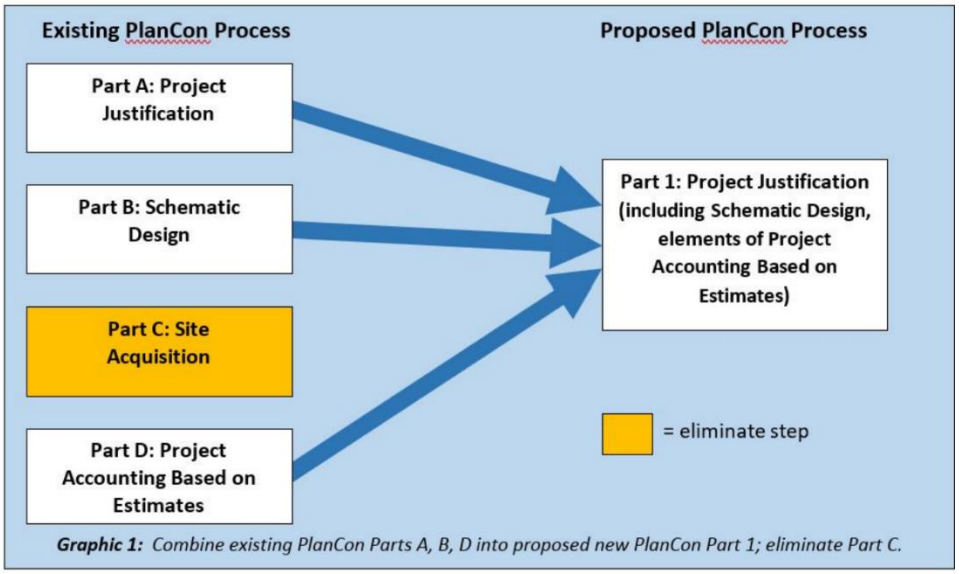
The old PlanCon and the new PlanCon 2.0

Pennsylvania began providing school construction reimbursement in the 1950s, with the PlanCon system adopted in the early 1970's and its accompanying set of forms that are still in use today. In 2015 the commonwealth stopped accepting PlanCon applications, establishing the moratorium that is still in place. Almost 10 years later, conditions in many schools have stagnated. We still see, today, schools without walls separating classrooms. Many buildings lack ADA compliance leaving some of our most vulnerable students and teachers unable to gain entry or access

Existing Classroom Conditions (Open Pod Classrooms)

certain portions of a school. Many mechanical systems do not meet baseline standards for indoor air quality. Dark, hot, windowless, uncomfortable classrooms house students struggling to listen and learn. Additionally alarming are conditions related to school safety. Examples include schools without secured vestibules, exterior doors that don't lock when closed, and interior classroom doors that can only be locked from the hallway. I can assure you that these unacceptable conditions exist in many schools throughout our state.

While the moratorium has left many school districts without the financial means to improve their facilities, the actual PlanCon program itself got an upgrade. Act 70 of 2019 (SB 700) reauthorized the program with a modernized procedure. The former 11-part process was reduced to a 4-steps. More focus was given to achieving energy efficient, high-performance building standards. Appropriate and realistic values – no longer based on 1970's standards – are assigned for specialized educational spaces such as science labs and technology centers as well as art and music rooms. Previously, these spaces, which carry a higher construction cost, were valued less than a regular classroom. Additionally, a system was created to support maintenance and repair projects as these were previously excluded from qualifying for public funding. An adjustment factor was also included to allow the commonwealth to adjust the total contribution each year.



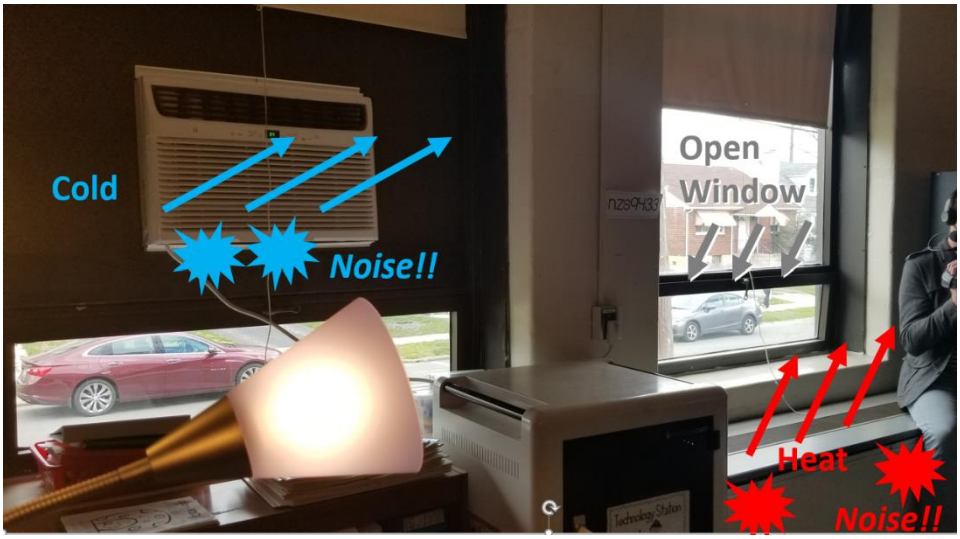
Graphic 1: *Combine existing PlanCon Parts A, B, D into proposed new PlanCon Part 1; eliminate Part C.*

Act 34 of 1973 applies to all new schools or any project where an addition is constructed that equates to over 20% of the existing building. This sets the "Aggregate Building Expenditure Standard" which essentially dictates the maximum construction cost of a new building or addition. This number is generated by taking the building capacity and multiplying it by the Per Pupil Cost Limit. There are several things to note here. First, the building capacity is calculated by using the old 1970's 11-part system that does not account for current educational standards as I mentioned previously. This can result in school districts being forced to actually build larger and more expensive building projects than they desire in order to meet Act 34 requirements. In the 1970s method, elementary schools are not given credit for spaces that are not a regular classroom such as libraries, gymnasiums, art, and music rooms. In a recent project I was involved with, we found that a school district could only build a new 800-student elementary school due to Act 34 requirements instead of a 500-student elementary school more that aligned with their actual capacity needs. In the new PlanCon 2.0, the capacity of all school buildings is determined equally, eliminating this type of outcome.

Want to make a difference? PlanCon 2.0 is already set up to do it.
The Pennsylvania legislature continues to look at ways to properly fund public education and reengage with school districts on the importance of quality learning environments. The good news is that there is a new, modern funding structure already in place. Act 70 of 2019 approved the new PlanCon 2.0 program with many positive updates and improvements. It's just that we forgot to hit the "start" button.

To be clear, there are two important attributes of PlanCon 2.0 that influence school construction. The new system would become the method used to verify a project's Act 34 requirements. As previously stated, these updated capacity calculations would more accurately represent modern usage of instructional spaces. The second advantage is that PlanCon 2.0 would serve as the catalyst to reignite Pennsylvania's commitment to improving public schools. So many of the issues impacting our school buildings can be addressed by lifting the 10-year funding moratorium.

For years before the Covid pandemic, and certainly since, indoor air quality has been a vital factor to creating a successful environment for learning. If you want to improve these conditions in our schools… fund PlanCon 2.0.



Existing classroom running heat and A/C at same time with the window open

In too many of our schools, hazardous materials such as asbestos, lead paint, and mold are present in learning environments. Often this has forced the closure of buildings, pushing students into already overcrowded classrooms elsewhere in a school district. If you want to address these potentially toxic environments in our school buildings… fund PlanCon 2.0.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1992. Yet far too many of our school buildings still do not meet the basic requirements of making all spaces accessible to everyone. Countless schools still do not provide wheelchair access to all building levels or appropriate provisions for toilet facilities. If you want to make our school buildings accessible for all who enter them… fund PlanCon 2.0.

Lastly, school safety, a topic that I am very passionate about, is too often a focus of the public only after a tragedy has occurred. While some school districts have begun to address recommended safety measures, far too many school buildings that I have visited are woefully inadequate when it comes to even the most basic safety measures. If you want to address safety and security issues in our school buildings… fund PlanCon 2.0.

Equitable funding is needed NOW!
If we truly value our children's safety and the environment that they are learning in, we must fund PlanCon 2.0. The current 10-year moratorium has impacted all school districts but particularly our poorest communities. I am aware of several who continue to defer maintenance repairs and building improvements due to lack of funding. They haven't ignored these needs. In fact, they are well aware their buildings are in poor condition. It's simply that they can't afford to improve these spaces and are waiting. Waiting for you to help. Waiting for the day when Pennsylvania will once again join the 37 other states in our country that provide funding for school construction and upgrades.

We ask you to restart public school construction funding in Pennsylvania so we can provide modern, safe, secure, and healthy learning environments for our children. PlanCon 2.0 is the right mechanism to achieve this. It is ready. It was approved by this legislature in 2019. We just need to hit that "start" button.

Thank you.

Michael Kelly, AIA, ALEP, LEED AP
KCBA Architects

The Hazleton Area School District, which encompasses 256 square miles, serves students from a cross representation of urban, rural, and suburban communities. The District encompasses 16 municipalities. Most of the District is located in Luzerne County; however, portions of the radius include Carbon and Schuylkill Counties.

The Hazleton Area School District, among the top 10 largest school districts in PA, is comprised of 16 school buildings. The organizational structure includes six (6) K-8 elementary/middle schools, two (2) 3-8 elementary/middle schools, two (2) K-2 elementary schools. The high school students (grades 9-12) are served by four (4) buildings that include the Hazleton Area Academy of Science, the Hazleton Area High School, the Hazleton Area Arts and Humanities Academy, and the Hazleton Area Career Center, which is the District's own Career and Technical Center. The Hazleton Area School District operates a K-12 Cyber Academy that is uniquely designed and housed at our local mall. The Hazleton Area School District operates the Luzerne/Wyoming counties early intervention programs. Hazleton Area School District also educates Pre-Kindergarten students. Our Early Intervention and Pre-K students are located in The Academy near our Arthur Street Elementary School. Hazleton Area also operates a Newcomer Center for our K-6 students. Our Newcomer 7-12 students are serviced in our other schools.

Our student population has grown in both diversity and numbers over the last several years. In 2018-2019, the District's population was approximately 11,500 students with a minority population of 54% Latinx. For the 2023-2024 school year, our student population is in excess of 13,200 students with a minority population is approximately 64% Latinx. In the last year, alone, the District increased its ELL population from 2,600 to 3,400. To meet the needs of our children, we have an ELL staff of 53 certified teachers at a cost of $4.5 million annually. All of our schools have bilingual liaisons and bilingual paraprofessionals to assist our students and parents as well. We continue to enroll new students every day. New enrollments continue throughout the school year. The District employs approximately 1600 people. We are one of the largest employers in the area.

Although Spanish accounts for the largest percentage of languages spoken in the District buildings, there are a total of 22 different languages across our schools. The special education population was approximately 12.8% in 2018-2019 school year. The special education population in 2023-2024 is about 15%. Due to our Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) percentage, all of our students receive free breakfast and lunch.

We have addressed the increasing population through creatively renovating spaces within our existing schools. For example, we closed four (4) pools located in four (4) of our elementary/middle schools to create classroom space. Additionally, we remodeled our existing libraries in most of our schools to provide additional classroom spaces. With those projects, we were able to secure 34 classrooms for $10 million. We purchased and renovated two (2) buildings recently. They now house our Early Intervention students, Pre-K students, and Arts and Humanities students. By doing so, we were able to provide more space in our High School, Career Center, and Early Learning Center. By redesigning our Cyber Academy and providing a home in our local mall for those who have chosen to learn online, we increased enrollment from 70 students to over 600 students. This increase in enrollment into our Cyber Academy has

allowed for additional space in our other buildings. However, with all of these changes, we are still not able to address the large influx of children we are seeing. As we know, educating children in smaller groups is a better learning environment and can positively impact their academic careers. Our regular education classrooms have large numbers of students in them. Our special education population is increasing which reduces the available space considerably due to the limited number of students permitted in a special needs classroom. For example, we are only permitted, by law, to have eight (8) Autistic Support children in a classroom. We have had to add a number of additional classrooms because of our increased Autism Spectrum Disorder population. As mentioned, this reduces the available space for regular education areas greatly.

The District's budget for the 2023-2024 school year is $225,512,780.00, which has drastically increased over the last several years to address the needs of our growing student population. Unfortunately, we are not adequately funded to meet all the needs of our children. We are 497 out of 500 school districts for per pupil spending. We are the lowest or next to the lowest tax base in all three counties our District reaches. We do increase taxes, at least, to the index each year. Many families are on fixed incomes or are renting, which makes it difficult to continue to complete our maintenance of effort with our tax increases.

Districts of similar size and demographics receive millions of dollars more than HASD. For example, Lancaster School District received $77,641,742. They are of similar size and demographic. Reading School District received $201,949,819. Again, similar size and demographics. HASD received $64,505,080, which is $13,136,662 less than Lancaster and $137,444,739 less than Reading.

Although we have our own Cyber Academy we are still forced to pay for students who attend cyber charter schools. We expend approximately $6 million on cyber charter tuition each year for about 400 students. With our own Cyber Academy, we are able to minimize the costs associated with its operation. To educate a student in the HACA is approximately $5,000 per student for roughly 600 students. Basically, we are able to educate more students in our Cyber Academy for much less. We teach students synchronously. We have dedicated special education teachers, phycologist, school counselor, administration, as well as regular education teachers who support all of our students in our Academy.

October 2nd 2023

Dear Hazleton School District:

We are happy to offer this letter of support for the school district collaborative efforts. The Dominican House of hazleton had heard the voice of the community in the last few days and the community in one voice has communicated the following topics they believe needs answers.

Implement the use of uniforms in the whole school district: It is a proven fact, that Studies Suggests School Uniforms Reduce Student Absences and Disciplinary Problems. Studies suggests that this might be a good thing as school uniforms can positively impact students' grades, attendance and behavior.

Bulling: One of the Main concerns of parents with kids at the Hazleton area School District is the constant bullying that occurs daily at our local schools. We need a program to make sure bullying have not place at school district buildings. It is a reality that bulling is more prevalent in first generation communities where students are adapting a new language.

Racism: believe it or not. Parents are still complaining about the treatment their kids and their siblings are receiving from the school district. They usually are not aware of the schools special programs or benefits for their kids. Which makes them think this is because of racism. The school district should implement a policy to guarantee the largest number of your students "the Hispanic students and their parents are receiving the same services, opportunities for everyone. How many of the school district staff is bilingual?

Bus Driver Helpers: Parents are complaining about the safety of their kids with the school buses and the drivers behavior. Suggesting it should be mandatory that each bus driver have a helper to control the students at all times during their time at the bus. This to avoid confusion, bulling and other issues within the students and to help drivers be focus in the road. There is reports of bus drivers being attacked by students or having issues in the road because of ongoing incidents at the bus while they are driving. Perhaps, the school district can hire drivers helpers? Or at least request assistance of volunteers to perform this job?

After School programs at institutions like the Dominican House of Hazleton. So students can be part of it. We offer a solution calls BREAKING THE CYCLE. Empowering Children &

Families to Thrive and Reach Their Fullest Potential In A Therapeutic Environment. Providing disadvantaged families with access to quality early childhood programs is critical to America's immediate and long-term economic future. Is the school district to support this type of projects? We offer our facilities and resources to help building this program.

Homeless parents and their kids: Parents wandering with children's in the streets, without a place to sleep and we believe that the school should develop a program to make sure these kids are safe and that their welfare is being taken seriously. Is the school district looking into this reality?

If you have any question don't excite to contact us at our address 271 north Cedar St. Hazleton PA 18201 Email; LacasaDominicanadeHazleton@hotmail.com Phone number; 570-497-5988 (We are a Nonprofit Organization 501c3)

This letter is neither binding nor exclusive to the signatory, and creates no contractual duties or relationships. Again we look forward to working with the school district to further support families in need here in the Hazleton area.

Good Luck!

Víctor Pérez
President Of the Dominican
House Of Hazleton INC

To Whom it May Concern,

The effect of underfunded schools directly impacts the most seriously underserved student population in our community. Consider that nearly two thirds of all the students in the HASD are Latino and the complications that arise from that. Lack of funding is the underlying cause in many, if not all, of the following real-world developments:

Shortage of classroom space. Children were forced to attend kindergarten online, and in many cases not at all, due to a shortage of classroom space. This causes children who are likely to enter school behind due to language challenges fall even further behind because of limited or missing kindergarten.

High school students graduating with no English language proficiency whatsoever. Instead, they are sent to social service organizations to do community service in order to get a diploma. Sets students up for failure when they try to enter the work world.

Shortage of bilingual liaisons in all buildings. Poor registration opportunities. When a family moves to our area they are frequently limited in English proficiency. This causes a tremendous backlog in administration and delays getting the children seated. Also stresses organizations like ours who end up doing the work of registration for the schools at our own expense.

Transportation problems: What good is school choice if transportation is so poor that many "better" schools are omitted altogether and the transportation to those that are participants is so convoluted as to render choice meaningless.

Teacher to student ratios in inner city schools are much higher than suburban schools: a problem that can only be solved with a fair-funding ratio.

Lack of technology and STEM training. Again, more funding needed.

Our organization has attempted to help fill the gap created by funding shortfalls, but we are just one organization and there are so many students in the district.

225 East 4th Street, Hazleton PA // (570) 861-8081 // www.hip1.org // hip1@hip1.org