

**Testimony of Dr. Amy Arcurio**  
**Superintendent of Greater Johnstown School District**  
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Chair Harris, Chair Schweyer, and members of the Pennsylvania House Appropriations and Education committees, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony today as part of this statewide education tour.

I have been both a social worker and educator for my entire professional career, and I began working in Greater Johnstown School District in 2002 as a third grade teacher. Since 2018, I have served as superintendent. My district was one of six communities across the commonwealth that brought, and won, the Pennsylvania school funding lawsuit.

The story of Johnstown is the story of Western Pennsylvania. We are a proud city, with proud people, and a proud history. But beneath that pride we have serious challenges. We were once a thriving steel town, but that industry has largely left. Many of our long-time residents are seniors on fixed incomes, and property values are declining. The last time we raised property taxes we actually lost money, because property owners simply reassessed their properties downward. By median income, we rank 498 out of 499 Pennsylvania school districts.

Our students also come to us facing profound challenges. Nearly all are economically disadvantaged, and many live in deep poverty. But those students are capable of amazing things, just as much as students in any other community. They can succeed as skilled workers, in higher education, and in their community, if they receive the right support. But because of our school funding system, a district like mine cannot provide all students enough of it.

Here is what that means in practice: Instead of determining which students need extra help—like one-on-one tutoring, or behavioral counseling—and then providing that help, we and other low-wealth districts across Pennsylvania are forced to perform a kind of triage, deciding which kids get these essential resources, and unfortunately, which kids don't.

Most students in Greater Johnstown arrive in school behind academically. For example, 80 percent of students in first grade need some form of small group or individual learning support. We are unable to come close to meeting these needs. In an elementary school with profound needs, we have just two reading interventionists. And despite similar needs for assistance in math, we have no math specialists.

This need compounds over the course of our learners' academic careers. High school classes that require passage of a Keystone exam, like Algebra I, are often crowded, as students must re-take them. We are proud to have a strong dual enrollment program, allowing some students to graduate with associate's degrees. But by the time they reach high school, just one or two dozen students are prepared to take advantage of the program.

It is easy to look at a school or a community or a student and say they failed. That is how people often label us. Here is reality: We have extraordinary educators who do extraordinary things. We simply do not have enough of them because of the way we fund our schools. We have students with extraordinary potential. We do not reach enough of them because of the way we fund our schools. We are not failing, we have been failed.

As you all know, in recent years, school districts like mine received significant amounts of federal ESSER funding. As a result, I have also seen firsthand what more funding—even if insufficient and temporary—can mean for our students.

For example, addressing the needs of our youngest learners is our districts' top priority. Accordingly, we made the choice to provide as much academic and mental health support to our students coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic as we could, using those one-time federal dollars. To do that we have hired a number of instructional aides to boost elementary school reading proficiency, focused on Kindergarten through second grade, and are able to provide some additional small-group and one-on-one instruction. We are not, however, able to hire professional reading specialists who would make the biggest difference for our students, because these funds—and these positions—are temporary, and those people we have hired have started to resign from our district in search of permanent positions elsewhere, in districts with enough funding to make a long-term commitment.

Using federal funds, we were also able to update our reading curriculum for the first time in 25 years. With this new curriculum, additional instructional aides, and the work of our incredible teachers, we have begun to see improvements in elementary school literacy, with more students progressing out of the “below basic” level. But this boost, still less than what our students need and deserve, is not something we can sustain.

Our facilities also are insufficient. We were forced to close our middle school when conditions there became unsafe, and consolidated four schools into three. As a result, we use every inch of space in our elementary school, and then some. In years past, this meant that the few students who were able to receive small group support would often receive it in a converted storage closet, with no windows or ventilation. But with ESSER funding we have remodeled, adding four additional classrooms in part by downsizing our library and eliminating our large group instruction space. But this, too, is likely to be a temporary solution, as our elementary school population continues to grow. In fact, each year for the last several years, we have added an autistic support classroom, with attendance capped at eight students.

We all know the challenges of trauma in schools. But for most of our students, trauma didn't start with COVID-19, it is a fact of life. And here, too, we have insufficient resources. Our limited counselor staff has often moved from crisis to crisis, with little time to support students before their mental health becomes an emergency. With ESSER funds, we brought on temporary mental health support staff, and found that the number of students who could benefit from this help was greater than we had been able to realize when our capacity was more limited. We can

now support more children, and their families, to prevent the crisis. But without the funds to sustain this increased support, we will be back to the old status quo of responding to crisis after crisis. Our goal is a proactive response. Without funds we will be reactive. This is never where educators desire to be.

ESSER funding was not enough, but even so, those funds will soon be gone, and our students' needs will remain. Everything to meet those needs—enough professional adults, safe and adequate facilities, modern curriculum—costs money, and Johnstown residents do not have the ability to provide it.

Having enough sustained, predictable funding year-over-year to make the necessary investments to serve all our students would be transformative. It would mean we could hire permanent, full-time professional staff for academic and mental health support. It would mean state-of-the-art spaces for learning, without overcrowding. It would mean one-on-one professional support for students who are struggling would be the norm in our district, not the exception. It would mean we could make decisions based on what our kids need not what we can afford.

Most of all, it would mean that our learners in Greater Johnstown would have a meaningful opportunity to become what I know they can be—the people who build the future of Pennsylvania.

As public school educators, we don't pick and choose our students. That is a challenge, but it is also what is incredible about public education: we serve every child who walks through our doors, regardless of their circumstances, and we have a duty to make them ready for college, career, and citizenship. But we need sufficient state funding if we are going to provide these students with what they need to thrive.

I believe in our students' ability to succeed, and I am sure that all of you share that belief. I ask the members of this panel to fulfill their profound responsibility, written in our state's constitution and confirmed by the court, to ensure that every Pennsylvania public school can help its students reach their fullest potential.