

Every Kid. Every School. Every Day.

October 5, 2023

House Appropriations Committee
Jordan A. Harris, Majority Chair
PA House of Representatives
512E Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

To the Honorable Members of the Pennsylvania House Appropriations Committee:

Since 2004, A+ Schools has served the Pittsburgh community as an independent voice for transparency, efficiency, and equity in student opportunities and outcomes. Over the past two decades we have continuously evolved to better meet the needs of students and families so our children can be successful in college, career, and life in the City of Pittsburgh.

While we always have had a focus on how we can support schools to improve, during the pandemic, we quickly saw that there is a need for greater coordination and alignment across schools, healthcare, transportation, childcare, and philanthropy to ensure every kid can show up to every school ready to learn every day. Along with nearly 100 other community partners, we've organized the Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative to identify issues that support children learning in and out of school and that get kids and families what they need. Collectively, we are on a mission to drive the rate of chronic absenteeism – the percentage of students missing more than 10% of school days – to zero. To do that we know our community needs to support families and schools to help kids 1. Get to school 2. Get to school ready to learn and 3. Have schools worth going to.

Our district sits in a context of local, state, and federal funding and policy. It has unique challenges that it cannot address on its own, and it and the 42 other surrounding school districts in Allegheny County, and the six hundred other districts and charters across this state need your help and support as they work to address the unprecedented loss of learning time that the pandemic imposed on our students. Provided below are some examples of issues facing our communities and some thoughts about what can be done to solve them.

1. Getting kids to school: Supporting cross-district collaboration and consolidation

Across the country and this Commonwealth, the supply of commercially licensed drivers has dwindled since the pandemic causing Districts to get creative in order to be able to meet state mandates to provide bus service for their own students and students attending charter and private schools. According to a recent report, Pennsylvania districts and bus companies were short an estimated 3,500 drivers at the beginning of this school year. As a result, Pittsburgh Public Schools has had to increase the number of runs school buses do from 3 to 4 each morning, increased the number of students taking public buses from ninth grade and older to sixth grade and older, and increased the number of students walking by reducing service to those living greater than a mile and a half from school rather than a mile.

And while these necessary changes have allowed the district to reduce transportation costs (from \$34.4 million in 2020 to \$31.2 million in 2023), they have contributed to a sharp increase in student chronic absenteeism (going from 27% pre-pandemic to 44% in 2021-22), often for schools with the highest numbers of economically disadvantaged students. As local education think tank Allies for Children noted in its 2017 report on school

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transportation found that the current Pennsylvania reimbursement formula “fails to encourage a more regional approach to school transportation.” This led to Pennsylvania’s schools spending more than \$1.4 billion dollars in 2015, third only behind California and New York, on school transportation. In Allegheny County we know that we have buses from multiple school systems driving a few students on the same routes to the same final charter or private school, a requirement of districts that few states make.

There are many examples both in the state and across the country of innovations that could be tried, but absent thoughtful reworking of funding allocations, Districts have a duty to continue this inefficiency to be able to best serve the students within their jurisdictions, for whom, they are charged with serving.

This is but one of many examples of inefficiencies caused by having over 500 districts across this Commonwealth. From food services to human resources to student services, our systems struggle to get to economies of scale and end up competing against one another rather than working together to best serve our students. We need think through where are there specific opportunities for collaboration or consolidation and the state should provide a framework of incentives and planning support to make the resources we use more efficient over time.

2. Getting to school ready to learn

With the unprecedented interruption to learning that our students have faced, we know that we’re going to have to find additional time so that these students don’t become a “lost generation.” Thomas Kane, a researcher from Harvard’s Center for Education Policy Research estimates that in the hardest hit communities, it will take three years of teaching 150% of the regular course content to catch most students up. While extending the school year or school day are often touted as solutions, a poll from 2022 found that 71% of families were opposed to extending school days as they could disrupt family routines.

If we want students to meet the standards set in state policy for all children, then we need to get creative about how to provide engaging and relevant opportunities for students to learn beyond the typical school day. Our out of school time providers here in Pittsburgh and across the state provide such an opportunity, but they need your help. Without state support for these providers, many are unable to hire the qualified staff they need to push in reading, math, and science supports. In the past two legislative sessions, you have considered BOOST Legislation to provide grants to out of school time providers through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. We would urge you to take this legislation up again and see it passed so we can staff up out of school time opportunities during the school year and summer that can help catch students up from what they lost during the pandemic, while also stabilizing a sector that provides safe and welcoming spaces where students can gain exposure to the arts and career opportunities.

3. Schools worth going to

Since 2004, Pittsburgh Public Schools has addressed a declining student population by closing 32 schools. These closures were painful, disruptive, and unfortunately necessary to keep the District on sound financial footing. Closing schools is neither easy nor popular as school boards who have had to make these decisions often face voter backlash and anger over the loss of these community assets. With birth rates declining, the loss of low-income housing in the city, and the continued growth of Pittsburgh’s suburbs, Pittsburgh Public Schools continues to lose student population, with 64% of student enrollment decline attributable to factors other than charter school enrollment over the last five years.

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Additionally, many of our schools were built in the early 20th century with over half lacking air conditioning or modern ventilation systems. While PPS has made sound investments in updating and adding these systems to its existing buildings, there still remains much to do and will require our schools to take on ever more debt to finance these capital-intensive projects so they can get done quickly.

The legislature could help. We have learned much about how to design schools to improve student learning outcomes over the past twenty years. Coupled with the need to give communities a vision for better schools if school closures must happen, we need a moonshot like investment in school infrastructure so we can optimize our schools for an uncertain future. Having too many schools spreads our abundant resources too thin, yet without an infusion of capital, the district would need to take more money out of the classroom to finance construction. We cannot demand of this community to make further program cuts beyond those that we've made over the last twenty years without a promise of much better schools for our children going forward.

There is precedence for such an investment. The state of Maryland along with the Baltimore Stadium Authority came together over a decade ago to finance to the tune of \$1 billion the complete renovation and construction of new schools while also closing schools in some communities. What if we came together as a commonwealth to replace asbestos laden buildings in Philly, to 100-year-old buildings in Pittsburgh and gave all of our children schools that meet the demands of our modern economy where there are facilities to learn advanced manufacturing and infrastructure to support the Wi-Fi needs of online learning.

We know that getting to fair and equitable funding must happen for students across the Commonwealth. Let's think of this time as an opportunity to make strategic investments that can launch us forward for the next hundred years while also increasing efficiency and student outcomes that members across the political spectrum rightly want. We know that if we work together, leveraging the resources we have in aligned way, we can get every kid, in every school, every day.

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you all, and I look forward to your questions.