

Hearing of the PA House Appropriations and Education Committees

Dr. Todd Bauer, Superintendent of the North Penn School District

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Chairman Harris and Schweyer,

Thank you for inviting me to provide testimony to the PA House Appropriations and Education Committees. My name is Todd Bauer, and I am proud to be the superintendent of the North Penn School District. This morning I had the privilege of taking some of you on a tour of North Penn High School which is a great place, I think, to start a day on which the purpose is to talk about school funding. I'll get to more about that later in my testimony.

As you know, Pennsylvania's system of funding public schools has been ruled as unconstitutional by Commonwealth Court Judge Jubelier in the landmark school funding lawsuit. There is little debate that the system is not ideal, and the Basic Education Funding Commission is, as you know, working on an alternative.

The state's funding system has exacerbated the haves and the have-nots in our state – and ultimately, children and taxpayers are dramatically shortchanged. This will continue, and Pennsylvanians will continue to suffer, until the system is not only changed, but overhauled.

Some may look at the North Penn School District and think of it as a more affluent school district, with high test scores and home values. While that may be true in some parts of our school district, we have pockets of disparity and those areas are getting larger each year. Over 38% of our families at North Penn High School, for example, qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Close to 13,000 students attend North Penn's 18 schools. Currently, just over 9% of our students are identified as English Language Learners, with one of our elementary schools reporting a population of nearly 27 percent ELLs. This is up from 5% and 22% just five years ago. More than 80 languages are spoken in our families' homes. We are also seeing an increase in the number of special education students and economically disadvantaged students. 19% of our students have an identified disability and 36% of students across the district qualify for free or reduced lunch. And our student diversity is increasing, of which we are very proud.

But with changing demographics comes changes in programming resulting in rising educational costs. Our school board is fiscally responsible and is committed to tax increases under the Act 1 index, while at the same time committed to providing an exceptional education which means hiring staff and upkeep of our 22 buildings. It is important to note that 21% of district revenues come from State resources, 3% from federal resources, and 76% from local sources. Eventually, without full funding of all state and federal mandates, difficult decisions would need to be made, programs cut and the quality of education diminished.

We need improved financial support from the state to continue to support our students. Fully funding Pennsylvania public schools would provide us the needed resources to elevate learning, engage our community, and to ensure that all of our students belong. As just one example of what this looks like, just this year, increased state funding allowed us to add an American Sign Language (ASL) program.

Full funding would allow us, and other school districts in the state, to modernize our facilities for our current and future generations. Now, this is where I get back to North Penn High School and our tour this morning. Like many school districts across the state, some North Penn buildings are in serious need of repair – they are aging, and they are used, hard, by thousands of students every day. North Penn High School is a perfect example of this.

Built in 1971, with a small addition in 1999, the school has had minimal improvements to it through the decades. We are now at a point that its systems can fail at any moment, causing financial hardship and possibly loss of school days for students. Although NPSD is proud of its strong financial health, we have limited means in terms of taxing over the Act 1 index. Consequently, an electoral debt referendum is needed to fund a portion of the cost of the project we desire to reimagine North Penn High School into a building that is safe, modern and collaborative. And I should of course mention our goal to increase capacity at NPHS to include 9th graders since we are one of only a handful in the state that does not have 9th grade on its high school campus. The rising costs of construction far exceed the Act 1 increase and make such projects less and less affordable.

Our vote is January 16, 2024 and our hope is for an informed community who votes for what is best for this community. We hope that our community supports a re-imagined North Penn High School, even though it will mean a tax increase above Act 1. If the referendum is passed the \$400 million project will be the largest public school construction cost in the history of Pennsylvania. While we are hopeful to provide an amazing facility for all of our students, families, and the community, we also believe that all students across the Commonwealth deserve this opportunity.

With full funding from Pennsylvania school districts would not be in this position. Full funding would allow us to provide even more property tax relief to our community. North Penn currently has an award winning tax rebate that has refunded more than \$687,000 to taxpayers in the past six years, but it's simply not enough. And some school districts have none.

Across the state there are many senior citizens who have been forced out of their homes because they can no longer afford their school tax bill on a fixed income. The high tax rate also makes it difficult to attract new families to our community. Without additional funding, mandated costs, such as PSERS, Special Education costs, charter and cyber charter school payments, will continue to drive up local property taxes because we have no alternative but to raise taxes.

The recent increases in state funding have been put to good use in the North Penn School District and the improved academic performance of students has followed. But we must keep that going.

Fully funding our schools means opportunity for our students. It means equity. Full funding would allow us to meet each and every student where they are, and to provide them with a modern, personalized, and individualized educational program that prepares them for life.

In closing, I thank you all for your involvement and participation in this important work. Thank you for helping to chart a path forward with education funding and adequacy as they relate to equity and opportunities for each and every child in Pennsylvania to realize a bright future. This is their right. This is what they deserve.

At North Penn, we have four E's that we stand behind. They are Ensure Belonging, Elevate Learning, Engage Community and Exceed Expectations.

I challenge us all to work together to deliver these endeavors to all students in Pennsylvania through an appropriate and fair funding model.

Thank you.