



**TESTIMONY OF THE  
PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION  
BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
ON  
CONTINUITY OF EDUCATION  
NATHAN G. MAINS  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

Good morning Chairmen Langerholc, Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to present testimony regarding Pennsylvania public schools' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am Nathan Mains, PSBA's Chief Executive Officer.

The unexpected closure of school buildings due to the COVID-19 pandemic has forced unparalleled challenges upon school boards, administrators, and teachers to continue serving students and families. Our school districts are stretching financial, technical, and instructional resources to bring meals, education, and services to children.

**Pandemic amplifies the value and need for support of public schools**

As schools were closed and stay-at-home orders spread across the Commonwealth, many families found themselves temporarily without the support and services provided through their local public schools. One of the first challenges faced by families and schools was continuing to provide school meals

to students, many of whom rely on the school for two meals a day. But, public schools stepped up to meet that challenge by providing drive-thru meal pick-ups and using school vehicles to deliver meals. As school closures extended, school leaders confronted the challenge of providing continuity of education.

### **Continuity of education struggle different for each community**

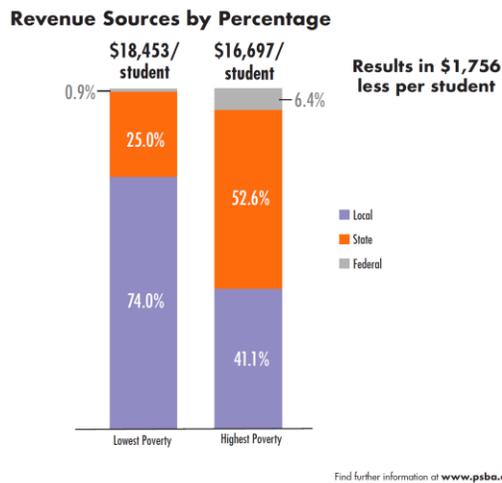
As districts implement their new continuity of education plans, the differences among districts in terms of available funds and resources, including access to technology such as laptops, tablets and Internet services, are starkly apparent.

Transitioning to a new educational model in a matter of weeks has been a herculean task, though the differing level of resources among districts has made that transition easier for some districts than others. All of our school districts have felt the impact of this crisis and have moved forward to provide continuity of education no matter what challenges they have faced. Some of our districts were up and running within days via online platforms and were able to quickly provide students with laptops or other devices and access to Internet, while others have just started full operation of online platforms last week.

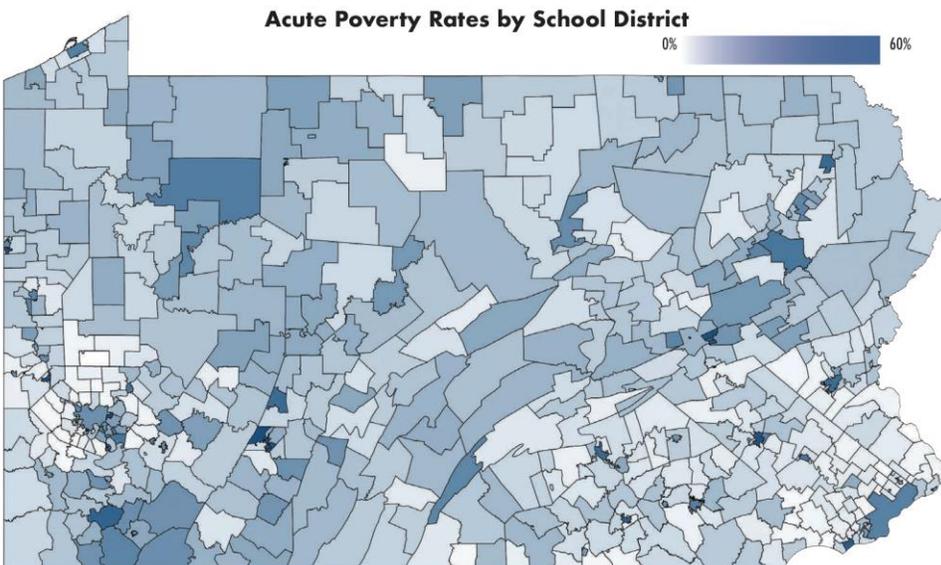
One of the biggest challenges from the start of this crisis was implementing the requirement to provide all students with a Free Appropriate Public Education. The challenge of providing instruction and support services as adequately as possible in this new environment demanded that schools meet head on the needs of all students, regardless of ability, technical resources, English Learner status or other special circumstance. A lack of definitive guidance also spurred intense debates within districts as to how to adequately provide instruction and support services in the best manner possible. Ensuring every student has access and can be provided with the accommodations and supports necessary to succeed has required legal consideration, financial assistance, professional development and communication with parents and families. Districts are making significant changes from the manner in which schools normally deliver instruction and services, such as providing occupational therapy or mental health services through virtual connections.

Another challenge is addressing the lack of access to reliable broadband connectivity such as WiFi and cellular service in the rural parts of the Commonwealth. Quite simply, some families do not have this access nor a way to

obtain it, and even when access is available, it is cost prohibitive for many families. Consequently school districts needed to provide online education to some students, while simultaneously delivering curriculum via paper packets to other students. This causes significant equity concerns since students in the same classes are being taught curriculum in different manners. In general, we have found that those school districts with highest poverty do not have the same level of resources, such as technology, as their lowest poverty peers, due largely to the reduced ability to generate local revenue.



Poverties impact on continuity of education has been amplified during the crisis – when acute poverty rates are mapped across all 500 school districts, it illustrates that poverty is not just an urban issue. Large stretches of predominantly rural school districts also experience high poverty .



## **Role of School Boards in Continuity of Education**

PSBA's role in assisting districts in moving toward continuity of education comes through our efforts to assist school boards with proper governance during this time. PSBA has offered free Zoom licenses, guides and training to effectively conduct school board meetings online and to ensure compliance with the Sunshine Act. We have offered legal advice to school districts to assist with implementing the provisions of Act 13 of 2020 as well as provided responses to many diverse questions that have all been posted along with numerous resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic on PSBA's website. PSBA has issued updated policy guides and resources to assist boards in addressing virtual board meetings, online learning, federal emergency leave provisions and federal funding. We have also expanded online learning modules, weekly discussion forums and discussion boards to assist school boards in learning from one another.

## **We will do everything possible to open our schools**

There are numerous challenges that lie ahead in order to open schools in time for the 2020-21 school year. Educators and parents are looking to their locally elected school boards, administrators and teachers to ensure our schools have the necessary procedures and tools in place to provide for the health and safety of every student. Now is the time to begin planning for what this readiness will entail.

Among the issues to be considered include the potential staggering of school schedules to reduce the number of students in classrooms and open space gatherings, transportation schedules, enhanced cleaning procedures and equipment for buildings and buses, implementation of additional policies related to PPE, air quality measurements and enhanced filtration, meal preparation and serving procedures, after-school activity precautions to mitigate the potential spread of germs, redesigning of facilities to enhance social distancing, and procedures for student assemblies.

PSBA, along with the PA State Education Association (PSEA), PA Association of School Administrators (PASA), PA Association of School Business Officials (PASBO), PA Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU), PA Principals Association (PPA), PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators (PACTA), and the PA Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS) represent members responsible for the education of more than one million public school students. Our education groups are launching several work groups aimed at mapping a path for

Pennsylvania students to return to classrooms this fall. While the Commonwealth's 500 school districts, 80 CTCs and 29 IUs have done a remarkable job of pivoting to meet students' needs via online and remote resources, everyone is anxious to get students back in their classrooms this fall.

This joint effort by our education associations will begin by launching a series of workgroups comprised of individuals from our respective organizations tasked with evaluating some of the hurdles school districts will face if social distancing practices prohibit large groups from assembling for the start of school or at any point throughout the school year. The workgroups will:

- Provide a set of considerations for school leaders and for policy makers to consider;
- Compile a list of innovative solutions for districts to consider within numerous areas, including operations, scheduling, facilities, academics, transportation and others;
- Identify and increase attention to areas of policy and practice that may require temporary changes in order for districts to be able to open in compliance with state, federal and CDC recommendations; and
- Develop an online repository of resources for policy makers, districts, communities, parents and others to access to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and resources available as schools look to successfully reopen in the fall of 2020.

### **We are all in this together – #PASchoolsReady**

In short, there is significant work to be done by our work groups to help meet the new realities faced in public education in order to protect every single student as well as our community. Impacts such as smaller class sizes and transportation may necessitate two separate schedule shifts each day and will require significant budget investments. The pandemic has changed all our lives and will likely change the ways schools operate moving forward. For the sake of our students and their families' health, our schools will change. Local revenue projections for this fiscal year and next fiscal year are significantly down. As we proceed through this work, we will keep state policymakers informed. Public education will need the support of our leaders to protect our students and to give them the bright future they deserve.

As you are hearing today, the work of public schools has not lessened, and the costs incurred have not decreased. On the contrary, the closure of schools has

brought a lengthy list of challenging dynamics and unexpected expenses in the 2019-20 school year. While the COVID-19 crisis has rapidly changed the financial picture that we knew, school districts need some certainty on matters of funding so they can plan appropriately. That is why school directors from across the state are calling their legislators today and asking for your continued support for public education in a time of great need and difficult decisions. We recognize that the state is facing deep revenue losses and understand that legislators will have to make hard decisions as the state budget nears. With school district budget deadlines also rapidly approaching, school leaders need some certainty from the state on matters of funding so they can plan appropriately.

**As key budget discussions occur, PSBA and school leaders ask that the General Assembly support public schools and take these steps to help them control costs:**

- *Maintain investments* for public education in the 2020-21 state budget without reductions in basic education, special education and other state subsidies for education.
- Provide savings by *adopting charter school funding reforms* that are predictable, accurate and reflect the actual costs to educate students in regular and special education programs.
- *Provide savings* and flexibility by adopting broad, long-term relief from mandates that consume much of school district budgets. One specific solution that our members are asking for is the permanent reinstatement of a mandate waiver program like the highly successful one which operated in Pennsylvania from 2000 to 2010. PSBA released today an in-depth examination of school district mandates. The new report is posted at [www.psba.org](http://www.psba.org) and includes a comprehensive listing of mandates, their impact on school district budgets, and the recommendations of a PSBA member task force.

PSBA has been working with legislative staff concerning the continued need to develop flexible legislation to assist schools and would like to extend our gratitude for the important provisions in Act 13 as well as the most recent flexibility allowed in House Bill 360 for federal background checks requiring fingerprinting. On behalf of PSBA, I want to thank you for your attention to, and support for, our public schools, and for this opportunity to provide input. I will be happy to take any questions you may have.