



**TESTIMONY OF THE
PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON
SCHOOL REOPENING IN FALL 2020
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2020 PSBA PRESIDENT-ELECT**

Good morning Chairmen Sonney, Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to present testimony regarding the reopening of Pennsylvania public schools in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Dr. Art Levinowitz, and I have been a School Director at the Upper Dublin School District in Montgomery County for over 20 years. Additionally, for the past 13 years I have served as President of the Joint Operating Committee at the Eastern Center for Arts and Technology, my local CTC. I am also PSBA's President Elect.

The unexpected closure of school buildings due to the COVID-19 pandemic has forced unparalleled challenges upon school boards, administrators, teachers, and staff to continue serving students and families. As we look to the future, and the eventual reopening of public schools, we are confronted with another set of unparalleled challenges.

While many challenges and the strategies used to overcome them will be shared by school districts across the Commonwealth, some will be unique based on student body size, staffing levels, existing infrastructure, district setting (urban, rural, suburban), district location, and financial means. For that reason, each school district must consider a wide range of choices to

accommodate their local needs, while prioritizing strong practices of health and safety as they strive to return to a new normal.

Health and Safety

Our primary concern with reopening schools is how to do so in a manner that protects the health and safety of students, staff, and visitors. School leaders need to think through and address a number of health and safety issues before reopening school buildings. Many of those issues were at least touched-on in the June 3rd guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) on school reopening.

PDE's guidance follows the Governor's reopening plan by differentiating approaches for the red, yellow, and green phases, with in-person instruction only allowed in yellow and green phases beginning on July 1. PDE guidance requires school districts to develop a Health and Safety Plan for physically reopening schools which adheres to state and federal guidance, and which is tailored to the unique needs of the school district.

PDE recommends that this plan be created in consultation with local health agencies, and be flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions that may occur given the dynamic nature of the pandemic. Plans must encompass a number of elements, including identifying a pandemic coordinator and/or pandemic team to help with planning response efforts. Plans must also be approved by the school board, posted on the school entity's website before a school reopens, and submitted to PDE.

While PDE's guidance recommends school districts address many of the same issues, it is important to note that the decisions on all of these issues will be left to individual districts and will mean that required plans will likely be unique to each district. Although PDE's guidance represents a good first step, school districts will likely require additional guidance and best practices.

Following PDE's guidance will also impact numerous aspects of instruction and school operation. For example, staggering school start and end times to accommodate social distancing in the classroom will have numerous instruction, facilities/logistics, personnel, and financial impacts on school entities.

School leaders will also need to consider what steps they will take to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To name just a few examples:

- How exactly will schools go about screening and monitoring student and staff health? Will the school rely on temperature checks of anyone entering school buildings and school busses?
- How frequently will schools screen and monitor students and staff?
- How will the school quarantine or isolate students and staff exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms?

- What practices will schools follow in excluding and readmitting students and staff who test positive for, or who have been exposed to, COVID-19?
- How will schools protect students and staff who are at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 or are at a higher risk for complications from COVID-19?
- Will the school require teachers and students to wear masks at all times?

My superintendent likes to say that the only ‘constant’ in education is change. Change in education can be challenging, as much of what we do is steeped in tradition. In my district we are now rethinking everything from virtual instruction and virtual graduation to planning for various scenarios as to what the 2020-2021 school year will look like. These may include the new normal of all students being in the classroom or some students being in the building while others are learning virtually. Inter-district and inter-agency collaboration have proven to be helpful, but the already heavy lift of planning for a new school year is made far more complex by the intricacies of COVID-19.

Our district has developed a steering committee to plan every aspect of our school days – from transporting students to and from school, and everything in between. We have developed a detailed timeline for the next 6 weeks including surveys to parents, Facebook live events, developing the draft of the health and safety plans, and soliciting community feedback. We have also selected the potential date of the week of July 29th for releasing our final plans. Of course, we will plan additional informational events in August.

PSBA is encouraging strong communication with the community and staff throughout the reopening process - I cannot over-emphasize that communication - with our county officials has been extremely beneficial. From the beginning of the crisis there has been regular meetings between the Montgomery County Superintendents and the Montgomery County Commissioners.

During all of our planning we must remember that changing circumstances with the pandemic may impact our plan and cause us to adjust quickly to a new model of instruction depending upon Department of Health and PDE guidance. Therefore, we will establish plans to deliver our educational program in school, virtually, or a combination.

Instruction

With the loss of the final three months of the 2019-20 school year, many students will find themselves coming back to school at their next grade level with a curricular deficit. School districts are working hard to prevent or minimize this through their continuity of education plans, but some students will inevitably require additional support when returning to regular instruction in the fall. As school leaders plan to return students to classrooms, they are also planning for identifying, assessing, and addressing curricular deficits.

The shape and form of instruction when schools reopen in the fall is one of the greatest unknowns school districts are facing in preparing for next school year. With PDE guidance

calling for social distancing in classrooms, school leaders are required to consider issues such as:

- Contingencies based on changing circumstances in the school community. For example, another outbreak of COVID-19.
- Educating students in shifts in order to keep class sizes down and allow for social distancing. However, this solution presents a number of challenges for schools in areas such as transportation, teacher workload, and cleaning in between shifts, as well as challenges for parents and caregivers.
- Holding classes in larger spaces such as gyms and auditoriums or using modular classrooms to allow greater spacing.
- Using hybrid models of instruction where some grades or classes would be taught online while others would be taught in-person.
- Starting the school year earlier to allow greater instructional time and in case schools are later closed again due to another COVID-19 outbreak.
- Students will also need instruction on proper hygiene, distancing, and personal protective equipment protocols.
- Ensuring that all students with disabilities can be provided the services necessary to a free appropriate public education while ensuring the safety of students and staff, and making determinations about the need for Extended School Year Services or compensatory education following the extended school closure.

Facilities and Logistics

Reopening schools with social distancing guidelines and alternative schedules in place will present numerous logistical challenges. First, schools will have to change the way they provide transportation, either by changing or staggering schedules, using more vehicles and drivers, or relying more on parents and public transportation to transport their children to school.

Second, many school buildings do not have the space available to ensure all students can be spaced appropriately. That could require schools to schedule classes in shifts in order to keep class sizes down and allow proper social distancing.

Next, schools will have to ensure they are able to clean and disinfect classrooms, common areas and school buses in between shifts and at regular intervals during the school day.

Finally, schools will need to evaluate and adjust student arrival/dismissal and lunch times; students moving between classes; student use of bathrooms, locker rooms, water fountains, and other common areas; recess; and extracurricular activities to ensure compliance with social distancing and health guidance.

Personnel

The adjustments and protocols that schools will be required to implement when schools reopen will also create numerous challenges related to school personnel. Chief among them will be ensuring school personnel are informed of the school district's plans to reopen and are

provided with any training on proper hygiene, distancing, and personal protective equipment protocols.

Increases in student screening, monitoring, and communicating on health-related issues may require schools to supplement staffing of school health personnel to strengthen capacity. This is true not only for physical health, but also mental health. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were struggling to keep up with the increased demand for student mental health services.

Necessary changes in the school year, school day, and the methods of instruction used when schools reopen will impact the agreements and contracts school districts have with their employees and contracted service providers, employment policies and professional development plans. School districts will have to work with their teachers' unions, other bargaining units, and contractors to successfully return to school.

Many school districts will also be trying to address all of these new needs and requirements with less available personnel due to necessary budget cuts as a result of the significant, negative economic impact of COVID-19.

Communication and Community Relations

As school districts begin to reopen, effective communication will be critical. Districts will need to communicate with local and state health agencies to monitor COVID-19 levels in the community. Further, districts will need to communicate with parents and families about the protocols and schedules in place for their children, and they will also need to communicate with their personnel to ensure they know what is expected.

To communicate effectively with parents and families, school districts must ensure that messages are in languages and forms that those who may not speak English or who have a disability can understand. Districts will also have to ensure that the information they wish to communicate is readily available and accessible, including to families who may be experiencing homelessness or who are migrant. While many routinely-used forms and notices are already available in multiple languages and accessible forms, many special communications necessary to equitably delivering education in the COVID-19 context will have to be developed and translated.

Families and the school community can be valued partners as schools reopen and endeavor to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. School districts may wish to extend safety guidance beyond their schools and provide clear guidance for families to use in reducing the risk of transmitting COVID-19 when children are not in school.

Partnerships with Other Education Groups

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 have launched several workgroups, comprised of over 100 public education and health professionals, aimed at mapping a path for Pennsylvania students to return to classrooms this fall.

The workgroups will:

- Provide a set of considerations for school leaders and for policy makers to contemplate;
- Compile a list of innovative and equitable solutions for school entities 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 local, state, federal, CDC and DOH guidance and recommendations; and
- Develop an online repository of resources for policymakers, school entities, communities, parents and others to access in order 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 workgroups to produce more comprehensive guidance to help meet the new realities faced in public education in order to protect every single student, as well as our community. Our groups see this guidance as a strong set of recommendations and considerations to supplement the guidance PDE has already released.

Finances

Another area of significant uncertainty in the upcoming school year is school district budgets. Both the Commonwealth and local school districts are expecting significant revenue shortfalls in the coming year. However, many of the strategies outlined earlier in this testimony will come at increased costs for school districts. Districts are grateful for the additional Health and Safety grant funding provided in the recently enacted five-month state budget; however, they are uncertain if these funds will fully cover the costs of implementing their health and safety plans. Should revenue shortfalls be greater than expected, districts have very limited options available to cut costs during the school year.

PSBA and school leaders ask that the General Assembly support public schools and take these steps to help them control costs:

- 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.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all of our lives and will likely change the ways schools operate moving forward. School boards, administrators, and teachers look forward to the eventual reopening of public schools as a step toward returning to a new normal. We are confident that with strong, continued support from the General Assembly, as well as the Governor and state agencies, we can overcome the unparalleled challenges our schools and communities are facing.

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.