

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented by Donna Cooper On Behalf of Public Citizens for Children and Youth Hearing in Philadelphia City Council to State of Schools May 6, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the urgent needs of the students attending the Philadelphia School District. Today as I opened the Inquirer, I read the full-throated pitch by Representative Turzai seeking to build public support for providing an additional \$100 million in vouchers for students attending private and parochial schools in the Commonwealth.

Instead that funding should be directed to meet the crushing needs of our public schools. If this money was distributed via the school funding formula, Philadelphia public school students would stand to benefit from \$25 million in new state spending. Here, the overwhelming share of students are in poverty, tens of thousands of students have a first language other than English and far too many of our students' education has been stunted by attending an inadequately funded public school. Our students differ dramatically from the families Rep Turzai's voucher expansion would benefit, those earning four times Philadelphia's median income - as much as \$284,000 a year for a family of four.

In contrast Philadelphia City Council made sure we are meeting its obligation to public school students. For the record it is important to understand that our City Council increased the City's contribution to the school district and now as local taxpayers we are now outpacing the amount of revenue the state is contributing to one of the poorest districts in the state. Philadelphia's local school tax effort, based on the state's own calculation, is the 17th highest in the state. Philadelphia City Council is to be commended. Obviously, the state, must do much more.

We can also do more, especially when it comes to reforming the overly generous tax abatement program in Philadelphia and redirecting new revenues gained to continue the progress made at the Philadelphia School District. There is one thing we must keep squarely in our sights: just because the District is not in fiscal turmoil does not mean the District yet has the funds, infrastructure, or talent needed to deliver a world class education. The new normal inflicted on us by the Corbett budget cuts and our just now getting to balance is something we must all resist considering acceptable.



That brings me to our discussion today. The District will end this year, like last, with a positive fund balance of at least \$160 million. Strong reserves reduce the cost of borrowing. And, this year marks the fifth highest level of spending on capital improvements since 1993 (the other four years were when Ed Rendell was Governor and the state was doing more to fund the schools). But, given the urgent needs of our students, the District should expend at least half of the funds it has on hand, in a responsible manner for urgent one-time facility upgrades that we know are needed to keep our children safe and promote their learning.

We cannot have students in classrooms coated with cracking lead paint, moisture-soaked floors and ceilings oozing with mold or crumbling asbestos laden insulation. While we have some funds in our bank account, the district must accelerate the removal of environmental hazards in every school.

We are only weeks away from the dog days of June and the heat waves in early September are unavoidable. Students cannot learn while they are boiling hot. I am heartened to hear the district is considering adding air conditioning to certain schools. I think it would be wise for the District to work with Council on a two to three-year plan to outfit every building with efficient air conditioning and ventilation systems and get a lot of that work done this calendar year.

Finally, where sites are ready, we need to continue the progress on rebuilding our school yards are safe places for recess and fun. Amazing individuals like Elaine Lindy, the William Penn Foundation, and companies like Comcast and AmeriHealth have partnering with our schools to make school yards great play and learning spaces. I commend them for helping respond to the number one request made by elementary schools -- rebuild our playground. These projects are inexpensive, one-time and more should commence with a portion of the projected year-end fund balance.

With respect to recurring costs, the District's budget proposal includes \$6 million to expand student counseling services and the addition of 50 counselors or student support staff. At the same time the budget includes \$77.5 million to pay for the educational services for children who are living in institutions, \$3 million more than what is being spent this year. Often, these are students who are court ordered to institutions for delinquency or dependency. I am certain that the District could avoid a substantial portion of these costs if more counselors and school psychologists were hired to help students because far too many of them suffer from heart-wrenching trauma and we have to put the resources in place to heal and teach them, not incarcerate them.

Within the funds the District has, I believe adjustments are necessary to boost these supports and give the courts, DHS and the students the confidence needed to avoid harmful institutional placements.

I commend the District for presenting a very sobering picture of what lies ahead given the state's failure to fund the schools while at the same time imposing enormous unfunded mandates. Rising pension payments continue to take a bite out of the budget and are expected to crest above \$300 million next school year. From this school year to next, the District must pay an additional \$11 million to cyber charters. In the next five years, 75% of all state funds received by the District will be transferred to charters for payments as their enrollment grows; consuming \$1.36 billion of the District's budget. What a tragedy that these skyrocketing costs rise unabated while the Speaker of the House proposes to expand funding for private and parochial schools, neither of which carry this burden. I urge to help Philadelphians who are exhausted of property tax increases and those who want to reduce business taxes to unite behind efforts to ensure that every available state resource that is directed to education be delivered to our public schools via the state school funding formula.

Permit me to close by pointing out that the District is projecting \$81 million from the Liquor-by-the-Drink Tax imposed when Ed Rendell was Governor. That beverage tax was maligned but certainly the opposition lacked the deep pockets of the soda industry. Beloved restaurateurs claimed they would leave the city if the tax was imposed. In fact, Towey's in Chestnut Hill and Bryne's in Port Richmond led the chorus to tell us that the Philadelphia restaurant revival would die if the tax was imposed. They are both here and doing well. And it's obvious that others have joined them to grow the ranks of employment in the restaurant sector in what is now one of the hottest restaurant cities in America.

I urge this Council and all candidates for council to turn their back on the sweetened beverage tax naysayers. Our school district is more efficient, and students are more successful, because we have a dedicated tax in place to support high quality Pre-K. Coke just posted record earnings last week; all will be fine if this Council stays the course and continues its commitment to prioritizing investments we know will pay off – those spent to care for, enrich and educate our children.