



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)

Public Hearing Regarding
Fiscally Distressed School Districts in Pennsylvania**

**Presented to the
Senate Education Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Piccola and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Mike Crossey, and I am a special education teacher with more than 34 years experience in the Keystone Oaks School District and the President of Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of PSEA's 193,000 members, I thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the challenges facing distressed school districts in our Commonwealth and what can and must be done to support them.

Recent events in the Chester-Upland School District have placed a national spotlight on education funding in Pennsylvania. The fact is that, just like too many families in our Commonwealth, too many of our school districts are living paycheck to paycheck.

I am very happy to hear that the Corbett Administration has agreed to keep Chester Upland's schools open and wish to thank those legislators who helped bring about this action.

But, I want to pause for a moment and remind everyone of the gravity of the situation there.

The Administration has agreed to keep Chester Upland's schools open.

What an extraordinary statement.

What the Secretary has said really boils down to this: Unprecedented measures need to be taken just to keep the schoolhouse doors open until June, just to make sure that 3,600 students get the public education to which they are legally entitled, just to make sure that the school district can pay its bills.

We should not be congratulating ourselves for this. After all, the *very least* that Pennsylvania's students should expect is that they actually have a place to go to school for the entire school year.

What we should be doing is examining why this crisis occurred in the first place.

Today's crisis was triggered because \$860 million in state funding cuts forced it to happen. It happened because these are the kinds of dire consequences we should expect when you cut state funding in a school district like Chester Upland by 14.4%. It happened because financially distressed school districts rely on state funding more than other school districts. And it happened because state funding was cut most dramatically in these school districts.

Chester Upland is the first to slide into crisis.

There will be more.

But I would like to begin today by telling the story of Chester Upland and by suggesting how that story will soon apply to other school districts in the Commonwealth.

The Chester-Upland School District has a long history of financial struggles, which is largely attributable to a failing local economy and heavy reliance on state support. Some have spent

considerable effort attempting to assign blame for the current condition of the district. However, the events that have sparked this hearing are attributable to the actions of Governor Tom Corbett and his Administration.

In March of 2011, the Governor stepped to the rostrum in the House chamber and proposed to cut education funding by one billion dollars. In June, the legislature passed a budget that cut education funding by nearly nine hundred million dollars. This budget specifically cut Chester Upland's funding by more than eight million dollars and forced the district to pay the full share of its charter school costs. Charter school costs for Chester Upland represent nearly 50% of the school districts total costs. These costs have been exacerbated by the Governor's decision to zero out all state assistance for charter school tuition costs.

At the start of this school year, Chester Upland started with almost 200 fewer teachers and support staff and class sizes upward of 40 students. Officials also knew that, despite these massive furloughs, the district still faced a nineteen million dollar shortfall. In December, it became apparent that the district would need additional financial support.

When Chester Upland officials asked for an advance from the Department of Education, they were told 'No'. In fact, last week the Governor even went on television and said that using Chester Upland to set an example for other districts is more important than providing them necessary resources. There is only one word for this – unconscionable.

The consequences here are real. Without the state's help, the children who attend Chester Upland School District will be denied, through no fault of their own, their fundamental and constitutional right to receive public education. This Administration staked its reputation on "school choice" under a guise of wanting to help students. Yet, when provided the actual opportunity to help the students of Chester Upland, they have failed miserably. Conversely, the individuals who work in the schools are doing their best to provide stability for their students. In early January, teachers and support professionals in the district made a determination that they would continue to work without paychecks and only hope of being paid later so that the District would be able to provide education and related services to the 3,600 students.

Last week, a federal court order brought forth a \$3.2 million payment from the state, and while it was helpful, it represents less than one-fifth of the amount necessary for the district to close its budget gap for the rest of this school year. Yet, Governor Corbett was quick to point out that he would not agree to provide any more funds to the District. The dedicated Chester Upland teachers and support professionals, who work there and devote their lives and livelihoods to their students, are shocked, dismayed, and saddened by this forced crisis. We can only hope that officials in Harrisburg will demonstrate the good judgment, compassion, and a commitment that is necessary to do what is right for the children of Chester Upland. The children of Chester Upland are hoping they won't be abandoned by those who are supposed to ensure they receive the same opportunities as any other child in our Commonwealth.

Unfortunately, Chester Upland is merely the first domino to fall in this education funding crisis. The education budget cuts of 2011-2012 were disproportionately targeted toward many financially struggling districts. Last year, the AP reported that the hardest-hit districts, such as Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Reading, and York, lost more than 10 times the money per student than districts like Cumberland Valley, Council Rock, or the North Allegheny School District.

These disproportionate cuts have resulted in devastating consequences for the students in these communities. The Harrisburg Area School District, for example, eliminated 200 positions or about a sixth of its workforce, and closed four buildings. The York City School District furloughed more than 120 staff members after seeing a more than 15 percent cut in state funding. Elementary art, music, and physical education were eliminated along with cuts to secondary math and social studies among other programs.

Unfortunately, York City School Districts officials' woes are just beginning. After eliminating 120 positions last year, increasing class sizes, and cutting programs, they are going to need to make even more cuts this year.

Why? Because their charter school costs are exploding; because there is no more state aid to ease the burden of those payments; and because the effects of the Corbett cuts get worse with every day that goes by. Worse yet, there may be other districts in similar situation. This Administration and General Assembly must act to save public education. Forcing public education employees to work payless paydays, poverty stricken families to purchase school supplies they can ill afford, while government turns a blind eye is not a viable solution.

In districts like Chester Upland and York City, where the majority of students live at or below the poverty level, the schools are reflective of larger issues in the community. However, these schools are also a constant in student's lives, providing them with nutrition, caring adults, and an opportunity to learn.

We appreciate the Committee asking for PSEA, on behalf of our educators and support professionals across the state, to share our thoughts today. You recognize the value of listening to the educators who work day in and day out in our classrooms and schools with our students. For that, we thank you.

There are no silver bullets that will solve the struggles faced by some of our most financially strapped school districts. When asked to testify, it was requested that I come prepared to discuss solutions other than funding. I will do that shortly. However, it is not realistic to believe that improvements can be made or that these districts, literally, can be saved without additional funding. Chester Upland is receiving less than half of what it should according to the General Assembly's own "Costing Out Study". When they were being funded at more appropriate levels, their scores were improving. In fact, in certain categories, the number of students scoring proficient or advanced in Chester Upland increased more than 300 percent from 2004-2005 to 2010-2011.

Still, significant room for improvement exists. Our teachers are on the front lines of education every day. My colleagues and I became educators because we care deeply about our children's future, and we are committed to the success of every child. Our classroom experience has taught us that the only way to guarantee our children's future, and our own, is to put students at the center of education reform and make a commitment to hold all of us – teachers, students, parents, and elected officials – accountable for student success.

Clearly, there are districts throughout Pennsylvania urban, rural, and suburban communities that face some level of financial distress and are not meeting the needs of their students. Something must be done.

One-size-fits-all reform is not the answer. Students are not “widgets” and with the need to address their unique learning styles comes the challenge of determining how best to do so. And although each student is unique and communities across Pennsylvania have their own circumstances and needs, PSEA does believe there is a set of criteria that needs to be in place for successful schools and successful students:

1. Qualified and committed teacher in every classroom;
2. Parents engaged and committed to their child's education;
3. Students motivated to learn;
4. Schools that can be run efficiently and are accountable to taxpayers;
5. Communities engaged with and supportive of their neighborhood schools; and
6. Resources necessary to provide the core, foundational elements needed for every student in every classroom.

In those districts where these key components do not currently exist, it is incumbent upon all of us – educators, parents, students, legislators, local leaders, and other advocates – to drastically change that reality for those students and define the local solutions to make that happen. In fact, we believe that one of the flaws of a state “takeover” model as represented by empowerment districts previously or financially distressed districts under current law is that those closest to students – parents, teachers, education support professionals, and administrators – have not had a direct seat at the table to collaboratively determine which interventions are most likely to improve student achievement based on specific data and key indicators.

In addition to empowering those closest to the students to determine the path to success, we also fully support the following research-based strategies and interventions as outlined in our *Solutions that Work* proposal:

1. Early childhood learning opportunities;
2. Smaller class sizes to give teachers more one-on-one time with students;
3. A safe and supportive learning environment;
4. Up-to-date textbooks and computers;
5. Additional learning time for struggling students;

6. Stronger communication between teachers, parents, and the surrounding community – including law enforcement and social service agencies; and
7. Recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

In reality, for financially distressed districts to be able to invest and implement any or all of these research-based interventions proven to improve student learning, there is a need for targeted funding. There is no question that money matters. In order to provide quality educational opportunities to every student, sufficient resources are critical – of that there is no doubt.

Yet, simply putting more money into our struggling schools, without clear guidance on best uses of the investment for improved student achievement and a structure for managing those funds, will not serve to address some of the problems and challenges that students and our members face every day in these districts. That's why we believe the best approach is for the state to provide critical data to the districts so that a plan for reform can be developed by those closest to the students, with guidance and funding support from state policymakers.

In two weeks, Governor Corbett will step to the rostrum in the House for a second time, and many expect that, once again, he will propose cuts for education. Each of you here today has the power to stop this. Tax pledges aside, we cannot stand idly by while our Governor is penny wise and pound foolish. For the past six months, newspapers have reported on the dire consequences the Governor's budget cuts have had on public school students. Class sizes have increased; tutoring programs have shut down; and courses have been eliminated. Is this what we want to become the norm for public education? Is this what we want prospective employers seeking to locate in Pennsylvania to see? No. We want and our students deserve access to a quality public education – our constitution requires it, and our sense of responsibility demands it.

I ask each of you and your colleagues to begin restoration of the 2011-2012 education funding cuts. If you do not, this hearing will simply be the first of many to address school districts in financial distress. I pledge that PSEA and our members have and will do their part. However, the educators, parents, and students of Pennsylvania need you to do your part as well.

Please remember the community of Chester Upland. The district's financial problems are not the fault of the 3,600 students and their families, yet, they are the ones who will suffer if we do not act.

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

