



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Reopening Schools**

**Presented to the
House Education Committee
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Good morning Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this panel and for having this informational meeting on such a critically important topic. My name is Joe Scheuermann. I am a high school math teacher in the Hempfield Area School district in Westmoreland County. I also serve as the president of my local teacher's union. A year ago, I was finishing my 25th year teaching, and I thought I had made it to the point in my career that I had seen it all. Perhaps I had not.

With very limited warning, my colleagues and I all become online learning instructors. The typical lessons in my classroom at the whiteboard, were replaced with videos I recorded on my smart phone as I solved those same calculus problems, which were then posted in our virtual classroom. My three-year-old and my dogs made frequent appearances in those videos, but I had to edit one video when my son walked into my video lesson right after he finished his bath.

When we began teaching this way, we had far more questions than answers. But my math department collaborated over email and I was able to find an answer for every issue. One teacher knew where to find the best online graphing calculator, which we needed because a number of students had left theirs in their locker. And another colleague knew the most efficient way to upload our video lessons to the Google Drive. But unfortunately, no one had a good solution for test security when you are evaluating students in the virtual world.

Without a doubt, we saw students struggling. I teach a few sections of advanced placement calculus. The students are described as the brightest, most motivated, and best organized – and they are all of those things – but they still struggled. For many of them the lack of structure and constant accountability that they were used to had vanished, and so they felt overwhelmed. Many fell behind. These are students who are going to Notre Dame, Carnegie Mellon and military academies. If they were having problems, imagine how it was for kids of lesser ability.

Some of my students had jobs in essential industries, but their parents did not, so the kids worked every day and fit in as much school as they could before they slept.

And for many of our students the food they picked up three days a week the school meant the world to them.

I am proud and appreciative of the swift and collective efforts of all stakeholders - including those of you and your colleagues - to do what was needed to support students, families, and educators during the initial months of this crisis, but I fully recognize that these actions are not long-term solutions.

What I've learned since March 13th is that in order to best serve our students, our schools must reopen. So the real issue facing us now is: How can schools prepare and do what is needed to safely return to some level of in-person instruction this fall? What does that look like? What will it take? Given that we do not currently have – nor expect to have in coming months - widely available testing, treatment, contact tracing, or a vaccine; our efforts must be focused on how schools can re-open in ways that limit the spread of COVID-19.

Successfully reopening our schools - and *keeping* them open - will require extensive planning, engagement, and collaboration among key stakeholders including educators and community members. The methods available to us to reduce the spread of the virus in our schools – such as social distancing techniques, screening protocols, personal hygiene requirements, in-depth cleaning of all facilities, and the use of quarantine on an as needed basis - are essential, but certainly not easy to implement.

The observations, insights, and expertise of educators and staff - classroom teachers like me; teaching assistants; administrators; educational support professionals focused on food security for our students, as well as those working to keep our facilities clean and safe - are invaluable for the development and successful implementation of effective strategies for meeting the educational, health, and social and emotional needs of all students for the 2020-2021 school year and beyond.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my administration at Hempfield Area for their efforts to date. They have already begun essential planning and have ensured educators have an authentic seat at the stakeholder table. We meet frequently in Hempfield Area, we've identified a number of issues and logistical realities to be addressed, including –

- Staggered schedules – some students *may* come to school every other day
- Transportation to and from school/ to and from sporting events on busses. Currently some elementary buses have more than 70 students onboard.
- Use of student personal vehicles – getting to and from school
- Protective equipment for students and staff
- Modifying common spaces like the school gym to serve as classrooms which allow for more space.
- Determining where students will eat lunch
- Equipment and personnel and materials for cleaning and disinfecting classrooms and all school facilities
- Meeting needs of students with limited access to technology and in-home supports. In a district not far from mine, half of the students do not have high speed internet
- Food security and safety
- Addressing increased anxiety and emotional needs of students and staff
- Screenings of students and staff
- Increased materials, supplies – particularly at elementary level – to support social distancing, reducing sharing of classroom tools and materials
- Hand sanitizer, masks, other personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Technology-related needs so that our in-classroom lessons are also available for our students at home
- Classroom spacing
- Reducing traffic in hallways, other common spaces
- Playground, impacts on recess time
- Interactions with visitors – front office interactions
- Balance between compliance of rules that keep everyone safe, and also creating a supportive and safe space and school culture (non-punitive approach)

- Targeted outreach and support for students most at-risk/impacted by changes in learning – students with special needs; economically disadvantaged; no internet at home; ELL; homeless students
- Ensuring student access to critical support personnel such as school nurses, counselors, psychologist, social workers and more
- Skill deficits – help address universally and/or in targeted way after interrupted instruction
- Technical assistance and professional supports for teachers - planning, implementing, supporting academic, social, emotional interventions
- And last on this list, I'd like to discuss standardized testing. My high school is currently scheduled to administer Keystone tests three times next year. While students did not take tests this past spring – they are required to the tests this coming year, months after their courses ended. Given the possibility that students may be on an every other day cycle, the testing process will take twice as long – but the testing window has not been adjusted. This all makes testing impossible - and creates a loss of valuable instructional time. We need help.

But even with the best planning and stakeholder engagement in the world, Pennsylvania schools cannot open safely and manage continuity of education for all students without significantly more funding. Significantly more emergency federal funding for education is ESSENTIAL. There is no way to safely reopen schools and keep them open without it. Period.

Pennsylvania school districts are projected to lose up to \$1 billion in local revenue as a result of the COVID-19 economic crisis. Providing continuity of education cannot be provided if school districts and schools are forced to reduce essential programs and furlough thousands of classroom teachers, school nurses, psychologists, counselors and social workers, reading specialists, and instructional paraprofessionals as well as our essential education support professionals who keep our students – and our school facilities – healthy, clean, and safe.

Congress must step up and provide at least an additional \$175 billion in federal relief funding for public education. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the existing disparities and inequities in and among our communities, particularly with disproportionate impacts on our low-income

communities and communities of color, such that students from these communities are most likely to have lost a family member due to the pandemic, most likely to experience food and housing insecurity and other economic harms arising from a parent's job loss, and the least likely to have had access to technology and in-home setups and supports necessary for successful distance learning.

Additional emergency federal funding is essential – not only to ensure all students, particularly those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – can return to school safely this fall, but also for Pennsylvania's economic recovery. This pandemic has magnified a truth I've always known – that our public schools are THE social, economic, and educational connective centers for our local communities. The economic recovery of this commonwealth is inextricably linked to the ability of our schools to safely reopen and the opportunity for our students to thrive and succeed.

As of today, we are just two months away from the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. We need to get this right. If we don't - not only are we putting more Pennsylvanians at risk of contracting COVID-19 – but we could also end up triggering another round of essential school closures and suffering the significant deleterious and disruptive impacts as a result.

There are no easy answers – but solutions must be adopted. We stand ready to work with you. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our insights with you today.