



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Basic Education Funding**

**Presented to the
Basic Education Funding Commission**

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By

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PSEA President

Good morning, Chair Phillips-Hill, Chair Sturla, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission (Commission). My name is Aaron Chapin, and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). With me today is Dr. Mark Price, PSEA’s Director of Research for School Funding and Finance and Labor Economist. Thank you for inviting us to share PSEA’s thoughts and recommendations on school funding and specifically, options for improving basic education funding and the current funding formula.

I want to begin by saying I empathize with the challenge you all have been tasked with fulfilling on this Commission. Pennsylvania is a diverse state with 500 very different school districts. As I observed you traverse the state on this tour, I thought back to my own journey through this Commonwealth. I grew up in Chester County attending Phoenixville and Owen J. Roberts School Districts. I’ve made my home in the Hazleton Area School District for 27 years. My wife is a teacher, and my daughter attends public school. I was a fourth and fifth grade teacher for 30 years at the Stroudsburg Area Middle School in Monroe County. And today, I sit before you as the president of PSEA, representing the interests of 1,000 locals in every corner of this Commonwealth, including right here in Bedford. The school districts that have played a role in my life and the lives of my family members are very different from each other – each having its own unique challenges and perspective on what is “fair funding.” And I’m sure that you’ve had a similar experience and evolving perspectives based on your own experiences, where you’ve lived, the viewpoints of your constituents, and what you have learned in your role on this Commission.

Having been deeply engaged in the work of the original Commission, PSEA is proud of the adoption of the basic education funding formula (formula). Our organization has advocated for decades for the State to drive more funding to lower wealth districts to help close resource gaps with higher wealth districts. Maintaining the formula – and investing \$2.3 billion of new funding through it since 2014 – are significant steps forward in this effort. Even if new investments have not been at the levels necessary to counter the inequities baked into Pennsylvania’s overall system of funding public education, Pennsylvania has taken steps to address equitable school funding. On behalf of PSEA’s 177,000 members, thank you for your continued efforts.

In 2014, PSEA – as many stakeholders did at the time – focused primarily on addressing disparities between districts based on income. Since then, however, indisputable evidence demonstrated that districts with more students of color received *less State aid* than districts in similar income groupings with mostly white students. It became clear to PSEA that we must focus on *both* income equity and racial equity in how our schools are funded – one is not a proxy “fix” for the other per se.

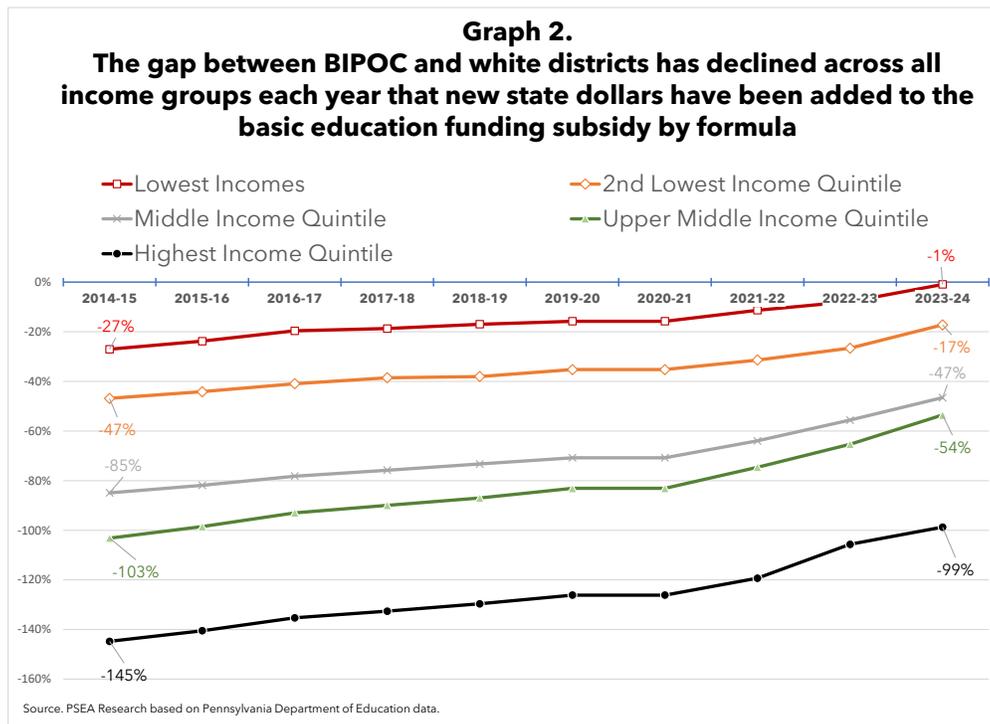
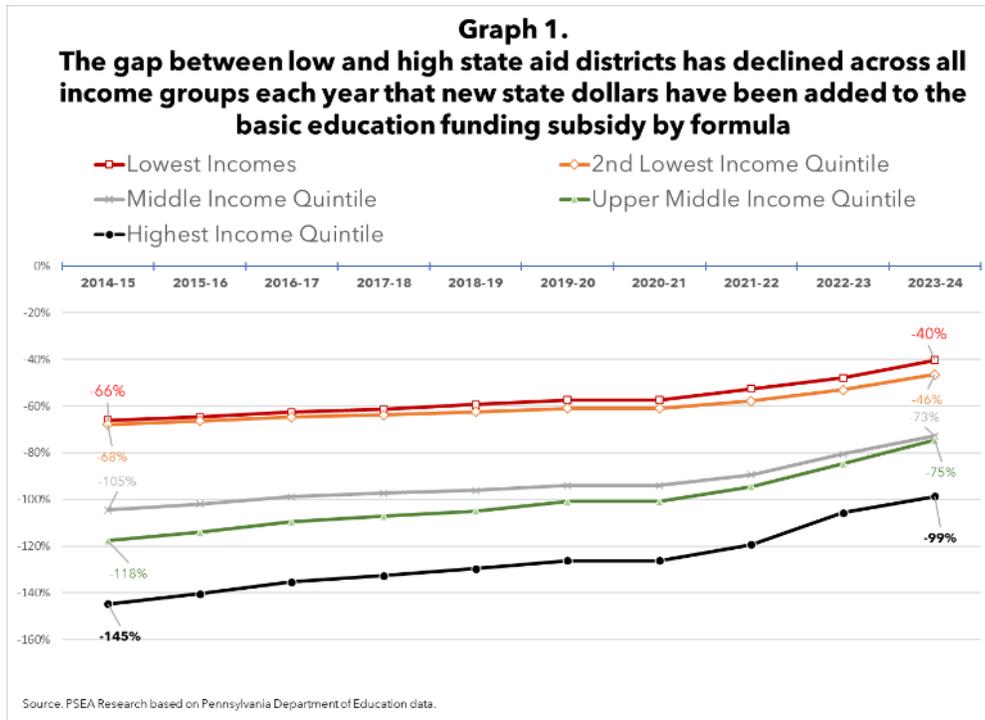
PSEA developed a Funding Equity Tool (Tool) to help provide a consistent and objective mechanism for determining whether funding proposals *reduce, increase, or maintain the status quo* of income and racial equity gaps in State aid¹ and in district spending². To help better evaluate the relative wealth of school districts and where inequities reside, PSEA divided all school districts into income quintiles using the median household income from the Census Bureau. While this methodology differs slightly from that used by Dr. Matthew Kelly who testified before the Commission in September, it produces very similar results. PSEA also analyzed districts with an enrollment of 30 percent or more students of color (*hereinafter referred to as “BIPOC districts”*) to identify gaps with districts with more white students (*hereinafter referred to as “White districts”*) within the same income quintile.

We present the findings of our internal analyses to demonstrate the progress Pennsylvania is making in addressing these gaps – while also acknowledging the reality that significant work is yet to be done.

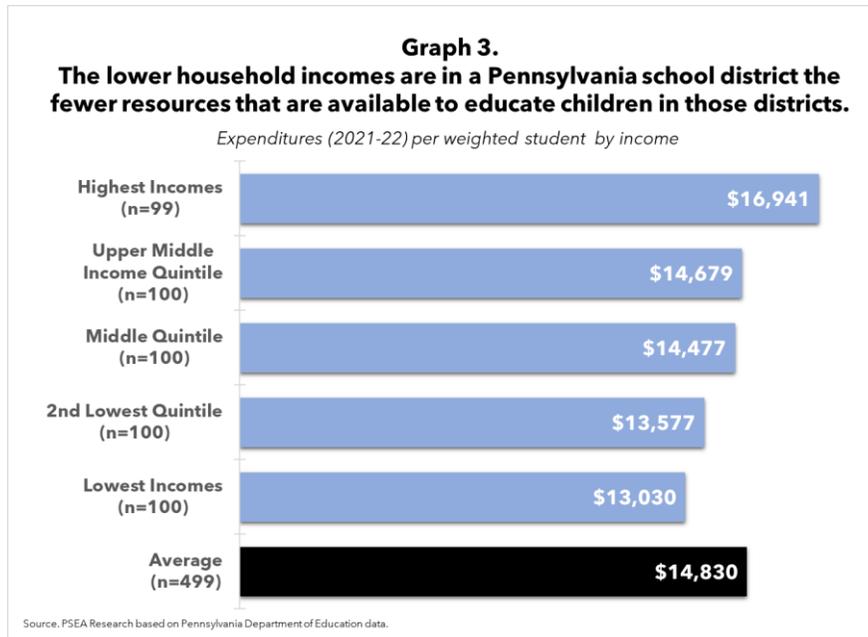
First – the good news. The formula is working as policymakers and stakeholders intended. As the share of funding distributed via the formula continues to grow, the gaps in State aid narrow within each income quintile (Graph 1) and between BIPOC districts and White districts within each income grouping (Graph 2).

¹ Basic Education Funding per Student Weighted Average Daily Membership (BEF/SWADM).

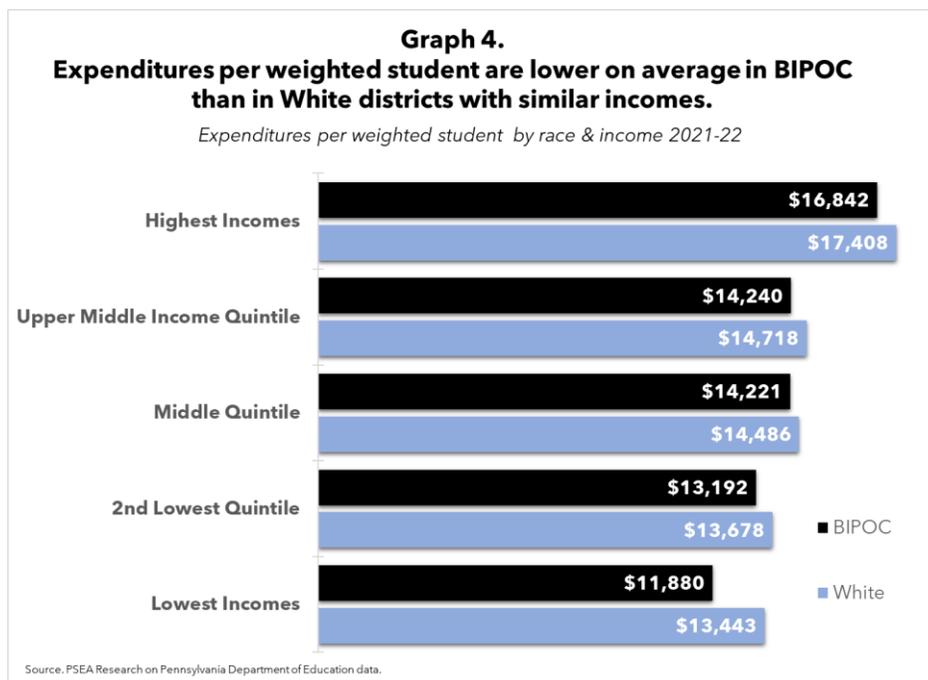
² Spending includes instruction, support services, and operation of noninstructional services, minus certain expenditures: tuition payments to charter schools; facilities; and other expenditures and financing uses. The spend number is then divided by the SWADM for FY2023-24.



Now for the bad news. When we analyzed school district expenditures (with charter tuition payments removed), **the 100 districts with the lowest incomes spend 30 percent less per weighted student than the districts in the wealthiest quintile** (see Graph 3).



When examining district expenditures for race equity, **BIPOC districts at all income levels spend less per weighted student than their White district counterparts**. Specific to the lowest income quintile, BIPOC districts *spend 13 percent less* than White districts (see Graph 4).



PSEA will continue to monitor and analyze State aid and district spending for equity by income and by race in Pennsylvania districts. In particular, we are struck by the reality that since FY 2014-15 the funding formula has worked well to drive more State aid to the lowest income districts – yet the districts have not been able to keep pace with the statewide average increase in resources invested in students by other districts, let alone even come close to narrowing the gap with the State’s highest income districts. If the formula is working well, we must ask – why isn’t the expenditure per weighted student also improving and growing? There are various factors at play and we commit to digging deeper into the data to provide recommended solutions as needed.

The findings from our Tool shared with you today only stand to support the historic decision by the Commonwealth Court declaring Pennsylvania’s school funding system unconstitutional. Judge Jubelirer’s thoughtfully crafted decision marks a generational turning point in the fight for equitable opportunities for all students. PSEA firmly believes the decision **provides a comprehensive framework for policymakers and advocates to utilize in developing a substantial and sustainable remedy.**³

THE FRAMEWORK

The Commonwealth Court Decision

Judge Jubelirer’s opinion was clear:

- The State Constitution requires that “**every student**” must receive a “***meaningful opportunity to succeed academically, socially, and civically, which requires that all students have access to a comprehensive, effective, and contemporary system of public education.***”⁴
- The Pennsylvania Constitution “*imposes upon Respondents an obligation to provide a system of public education that does not discriminate against students based on the level of income and value of taxable property in their school districts.*”⁵

³ William Penn School District, et al. v. Pa. Department of Education, et al., 294 A.3d 537 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2023)

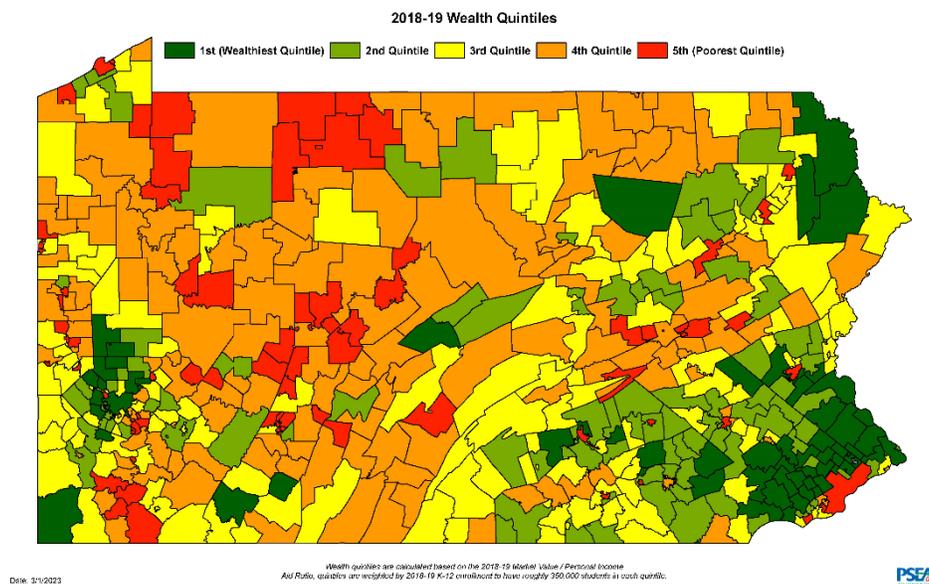
⁴ Id. at 886 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Id. at 964.

- Respondents⁶ have not fulfilled their obligations under the Education Clause.
- *As a result of disparities – “students attending low-wealth districts are being deprived of equal protection of law.”*⁷

As with any policy, one should design it to meet the intended purpose. The Court made it clear that a remedy must focus on creating a constitutional system – one that does not force districts to “deprive” students of their constitutional right to a **“comprehensive effective, and contemporary system of public education”** due to inadequate and inequitable State funding.

Based on the Court’s opinion, PSEA has no doubt that the remedy must be focused on the districts in the two lowest wealth quintiles (marked in Red and Orange in the following map).



Therefore, a “remedy” that would reduce basic education funding for 210 school districts in the lowest two quintiles - those that should be the target of the remedy - is clearly no remedy at all.⁸ The “remedy” I am referring to is eliminating the “base” and distributing the

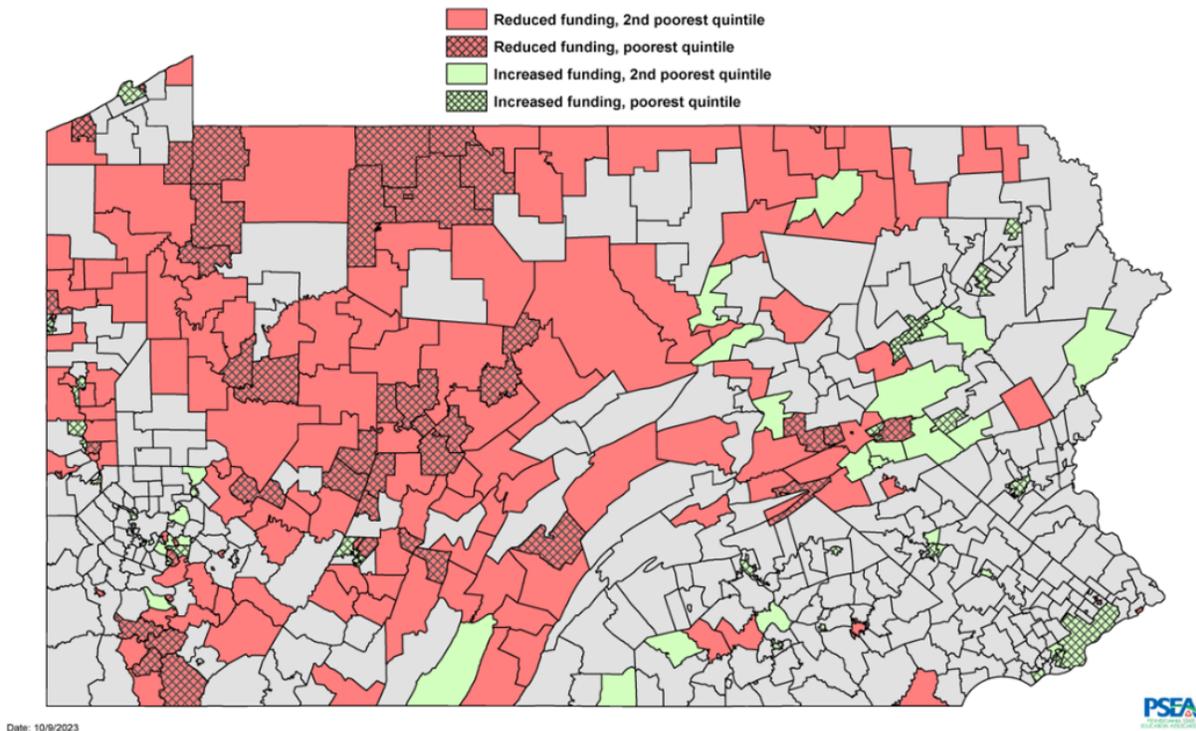
⁶ *Id.* at 965.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ PSEA would note that applying the formula to the entire basic education subsidy would simultaneously increase state funding to 120 districts in the top two wealthiest quintiles.

entire basic education funding subsidy through the funding formula. While the formula does respond to student needs and district conditions, it is also dynamic and can dramatically swing a district’s level of funding from year to year. The base provides districts with some semblance of financial stability. Eliminating the base and applying the current formula to all basic education funding to districts would have deleterious consequences (see map below). PSEA has, and continues to, strongly oppose distributing all basic education funding through the formula.

The 210 districts in the two poorest quintiles (the focus of the court ruling) with an increase or decrease in in basic education funding (BEF) from 2022-23 to 2023-24 if (a) “hold harmless” were eliminated and (b) ALL BEF money (including the BASE) were distributed through the formula



Adequacy Targets

The Court’s ruling highlighted specific “inputs” that are essential to afford students the opportunity to meet State-determined “outcomes” - ***with funding as the foundational input for all other inputs.***⁹ Districts cannot hire more teachers, remodel buildings, purchase new school curricula, or offer better technology and classroom supplies without the money to pay for them. Therefore, the question isn’t *if* there is a need for more funding, but *how much*.

⁹ Id. at 909.

In his testimony before the Commission, Dr. Kelly presented clear, transparent evidence that Pennsylvania has an adequacy gap of **\$6.2 billion**. Utilizing a “successful schools model,” Dr. Kelly identified districts that were meeting the State’s interim performance goals outlined in the State’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan for graduation rates and the most recent available proficiency rates in Math and English. Dr. Kelly then removed the outliers of the highest and lowest-spending districts and calculated the median spend in the remaining 50 districts to determine a base cost per student of \$14,152.

Many policymakers have talked about the need for so-called performance-based funding, whether it’s within the State budget or higher education funding specifically. *The “successful schools model” is a performance-based adequacy analysis.* PSEA would further note that the decision to use the “successful schools model” to calculate an updated base cost and corresponding adequacy gaps directly responds to criticisms raised of the 2008 Costing Out Study, including those of former Senate Education Committee Chairman Jeff Piccola criticized the original Costing Out Study for its lack of transparency for calculating the adequacy figures. Dr. Kelly’s analysis, which is transparent and can be easily replicated by other analysts, responsibly responds to criticisms from the past.

Given the information presented by Dr. Kelly, as well the findings of fact included in the Commonwealth Court decision, PSEA urges the Commonwealth to do the following:

- **Establish adequacy targets for school districts.** The State and districts need a goal to be able to judge if we’re making progress. Adequacy targets should start with the base cost to educate a student as well as reflect the differing needs of students to access comprehensive, effective, and contemporary public education.
- **Adopt a transparent and sustainable plan for closing adequacy gaps** – No one expects the State to close adequacy gaps in a single year. That would be unrealistic for the Commonwealth and school districts. The State and districts need to *plan* for increased investments and how they are going to close equity gaps within the inputs the Court identified. It will take time, but a plan has a begin date and end date. The plan should prioritize the districts in the two lowest wealth quintiles.

PSEA Recommendations for improving the BEF Formula

- **Revise the formula to improve stability and predictability for school districts.** This is essential for school business managers, superintendents, and boards to make crucial decisions and commit to long-term programs and staffing needs. Strategic formula revisions reduce volatility without sacrificing the formula’s dynamic ability to respond to student needs and unique district conditions:
 1. Poverty count – Use a three-year average student count (ADM).
 2. Poverty concentration cliff – Create a “safe harbor” mechanism to ensure that a district cannot fall off the list of qualifying districts. Apply the safe harbor provision to districts for anywhere from three to five years. If a district goes back on the list, the clock stops, and then starts over every time a district falls off the list.
 3. Median household income index (MHHI) – Average districts’ MHHI over three years.
 4. Local effort capacity index (LECI) – Update with a three-year average within the ADM for the weighted student count. Additionally, PSEA looks forward to seeing PASBO’s modeling on how to adjust measuring local effort relative to a district’s individual growth, rather than the current measure which is relative to local effort in all 500 districts which can penalize districts even as they increase property taxes every year.

- **Maintain the “base” but reset “base” year to one that is more current.** With almost ten years of formula use, readjusting the base to a more recent year creates balance between consistent, predictable funding and the more dynamic funding allocated through formula shares. We’ve heard the importance of the base and predictability in funding from other testifiers, particularly school business managers. A district that best demonstrates the importance of the base and how an infusion can stabilize it is Erie’s Public Schools. In 2017, the General Assembly provided the district with a \$14 million supplement that was eventually transferred into its base.¹⁰ This is a district that was

¹⁰ The additional \$14 million was initially provided to Erie via the Education Access Program.

teetering on financial recovery status. It would not have been able to recover without the steadfast support and advocacy from Sen. Laughlin, Rep. Merski, Rep. Bizzarro, and Rep. Harkins – who all recognize the importance of the base and predictable funding.

- Ensure new State funding is not solely provided through the basic education subsidy.** The adequacy targets presented by Dr. Kelly take into account special education expenditures. Therefore, a resolution cannot solely be directed within the basic education subsidy. Pennsylvania needs to commit to significant funding support for school districts with a greater share of special education students. Consider this: Pennsylvania has invested 7 times more funding in basic education than special education since 2014-15. And special education remains one of the largest cost-drivers of school districts.
- Eliminate the charter weight in the formula and re-establish a charter tuition reimbursement subsidy to school districts of at least \$500 million, indexed annually.** The charter weight in the BEF formula is ineffective in remedying the stranded costs of charter tuition. It accounts for only \$32 million of the current formula allocation, yet total tuition payments from districts to charter and cyber charter schools is \$3 billion. **In the past ten years, tuition payments from districts to charter and cyber charter schools have increased by \$1.4 billion – *outpacing increases in basic education funding to districts.*** Fifty-five percent of these increased costs have been borne by the districts in the poorest quintile (Table 1). Re-establishing the charter tuition reimbursement beginning at a minimum of \$500 million (and annually indexed) provides a middle ground if policymakers cannot find resolution on reasonable changes to how charter tuition is calculated.

Table 1. Charter tuition expenditures compared to basic education increases - 2012-13 to 2021-22				
	Increase in Charter Tuition Expenditures from 2012-13 to 2021-22		Increase in Basic Education Subsidy Revenue 2012-13 to 2021-22	
	\$	Share of Total	\$	Share of Total
Statewide¹	1,411,567,488		1,138,285,056	

<i>By Wealth Quintile²:</i>				
Wealthiest quintile (n=67)	132,829,232	9%	89,559,104	8%
Upper middle wealth quintile (n=94)	144,652,872	10%	136,757,760	12%
Middle wealth quintile (n=128)	199,612,128	14%	155,128,704	14%
Second poorest quintile (n=143)	157,281,608	11%	201,208,576	18%
Poorest quintile (n=67)	777,176,768	55%	555,596,672	49%
<i>¹Statewide figures include revenue/expenditure data for Bryn Athyn. The wealth quintiles do not include Bryn Athyn's revenue/expenditure data.</i>				
<i>²Wealth quintiles calculated by Pennsylvania State University Professor of Education Matthew Kelly based on the 2018-19 Market Value / Personal Income Aid Ratio. Quintiles weighted by 2018-19 K-12 enrollment - roughly 350,000 students in each quintile.</i>				
<i>Source: PSEA Research based on school district financial data collected from individual districts on PDE-2057.</i>				

School District Accountability for New Funds

When the State commits billions more to close adequacy gaps for districts, it is reasonable to seek greater accountability for how those funds are invested.

As a member-driven organization, PSEA leaders have spent the past several months meeting with members and engaging them on what they see as the vision for public education and for our union. ***Much of what we hear is the need to ensure that the State invests more in public education and ensure this additional funding is invested in evidence-based programs and strategies connected to the inputs identified by the Court, tailored to meet the needs of their students.*** And PSEA’s members want to be consulted by administrators on how districts should invest significant new dollars specifically in their buildings.

Educators and researchers concur there are evidence-based strategies and programs proven to improve educational outcomes for students. Pennsylvania should ensure districts are utilizing these strategies, provided by certified and well-trained professionals, and made available to ALL students who need them. Strategies and programs include things like pre-kindergarten; full-day kindergarten; a sufficient number of reading and math specialists who can intervene and provide one-on-one supports to students who are struggling; continuous resources and programs supporting students emotional and social well-being; after-school programs; tutoring; small group instruction, more personalized learning, and smaller class sizes; experienced teachers providing instruction in the subject area for which they are certified; social and emotional support services delivered via certified school social workers, psychologists, counselors, and nurses at ratios that reflect best practice; and many more.¹¹

It is important to note that the common thread throughout each of these **is the need for enough well-trained and well-supported educators and staff**. This is particularly impactful for students in low wealth districts where they may lack resources at home or face additional barriers to learning. And while some of these districts may have some of the personnel needed, it is insufficient to consistently implement these essential programs and support student needs.

Court Input: STAFFING

Pennsylvania is several years into a crisis-level teacher shortage that is only going to worsen unless the Commonwealth urgently adopts significant, concerted actions to reverse this trend. **Without an adequate supply of well-trained, qualified educators and staff, Pennsylvania cannot ensure a constitutional system of public education.**

Since 2012-23, there has been a **75 percent decline in the number of Instructional I certificates** issued to in-state graduates. During that same period, there has been a **424 percent increase in the number of emergency permits issued** (see Table 2). This crisis has impacts across the Commonwealth – but most acutely in our low wealth and poorest districts. The Commonwealth is not producing enough teachers to meet demand and districts need more educators. **Giving school districts more money through a remedy without addressing the**

¹¹ *Id.* at 598-602.

pipeline will perpetuate the “hunger games” approach to personnel recruitment between and among school districts, and ultimately the underlying problem will not be solved.

School districts can’t manifest more teachers, more paraprofessionals, and more mental health professionals, establish smaller class sizes, reduce special education caseloads, or add new academic programs without the State urgently and comprehensively addressing the educator pipeline.

Table 2. Instructional I and Emergency Permits Issued in Pennsylvania			
2012-13 to 2021-22			
Year	In-State Instructional I Certificates Issued	Out-of-State Instructional I Certificates Issued	Emergency Permits (Types 1 and 4)
2012-2013	16,614	2,343	1,214
2013-2014	9,893	1,290	1,165
2014-2015	8,751	1,329	1,377
2015-2016	8,271	1,402	1,971
2016-2017	4,412	992	2,972
2017-2018	5,842	1,076	3,783
2018-2019	5,505	1,125	4,330
2019-2020	5,128	878	4,665
2020-2021	5,440	1,101	5,958
2021-2022	4,220	881	6,366
Percentage change between 2012-13 and 2021-22	-75%	-62%	424%

Source: PDE – Act 82 Report. <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Pages/Act82.aspx>.

The Commonwealth Court decision rightly recognized that “[a] component of a thorough and efficient system of public education...involves teachers, *specifically sufficient, well-trained, and*

experienced ones.”¹² Staffing directly impacts the availability AND quality of educational opportunities for students. Policies at the Federal and State levels have long recognized the existential importance of ensuring students have equitable access to effective educators.

PSEA urges the Commission to include recommendations for addressing the educator shortage in its final report. *Without an adequate supply of well-trained, qualified educators and staff, Pennsylvania cannot ensure a constitutional system of public education.*

The students sitting in today’s classrooms are our future teachers, reading and math coaches, certified nurses, counselors, social workers, instructional aides and more. Pennsylvania must incentivize these young people to enter the education profession. The only way that can be done is to demonstrate through action that policymakers truly do respect and value the profession.

But what students witness now – teachers being demonized as part of a broader culture war, continually facing new threats and challenges each day, limited to no flexibility in their work schedule, limited input into what they teach and how they teach it; and not being paid what they are worth or required to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet – discourages them from even considering a future as an educational professional.

There are 491 districts with a starting salary of less than \$60,000 and 27,440 teachers and other education professionals currently making less than that amount. These educators earn a median salary (\$53,462) that is 17 percent less than the Statewide median salary of Pennsylvanians with bachelor’s degrees (\$64,722). Moreover, in the wealthiest quintile of districts the average teacher salary is \$85,543, while the poorest quintile’s average bargaining unit salary of \$64,075 is 11 percent below the Statewide average bargaining unit salary of \$72,074. Over \$21,000 separates educators’ average salary between the poorest and the wealthiest school districts. Districts in the poorest quintiles cannot compete.

¹² Id. at 916 (emphasis added).

Table 3. Average bargaining unit salaries in 2022-23 overall and by wealth quintile (2018-19)

	Average Salary in 2022-23	% Difference from Average
Wealthiest quintile (n=67 districts)	85,543	19%
Upper middle wealth quintile (n=94 districts)	76,797	7%
Middle wealth quintile (n=128 districts)	71,172	-1%
Second poorest quintile (n=143 districts)	67,215	-7%
Poorest quintile (n=67 districts)	64,075	-11%
Average	72,074	

Source: PSEA Research based on Pennsylvania Department of Education Data.

To combat the very real challenge of the staffing shortage, PSEA has proposed raising the statutory minimum teacher salary from \$18,500 to \$60,000 and raising our minimum education support staff salary to \$20 per hour to make the profession more economically viable.

Compensation is a critical factor in people’s evaluation of the profession. Since 2010, changes enacted by the General Assembly to the State’s defined benefit pension system have reduced the system’s effectiveness as a recruitment and incentive tool. Many states, including New Mexico, Arkansas, and Tennessee, have a minimum salary of \$50,000. Maryland will have a minimum starting salary of \$60,000 beginning in 2026. West Virginia has proposed to go to \$50,000. On the other hand, Pennsylvania’s statutory minimum salary remains at \$18,500, with the lowest contractual starting salary being Turkeyfoot Valley at \$22,000.

Table 4. Average starting teacher salary in 2022-23 overall and by wealth quintile (2018-19)

	Average Start in 2022-23	% Difference from Average
Wealthiest quintile (n=67 districts)	52,177	8%
Upper middle wealth quintile (n=94 districts)	51,330	6%
Middle wealth quintile (n=128 districts)	48,701	1%

Second poorest quintile (n=143 districts)	46,686	-4%
Poorest quintile (n=67 districts)	43,683	-10%
Average	48,409	

Source: PSEA Research based on Pennsylvania Department of Education Data.

And while it is challenging to hire teachers in the current environment, schools are finding it nearly impossible to hire support staff. These individuals are essential for supporting the whole child in their learning – everything from transporting them safely to and from school, providing additional supports in the classroom, maintaining their schools and facilities, and making sure they have a healthy breakfast and lunch.

Consider that a teacher’s aide in a special needs classroom, for example, faces some of the most difficult work imaginable. Their jobs are physical and demanding, require enormous compassion, and often involve students with severe physical and intellectual disabilities. They are often times punched, kicked or bitten. They play the role of educator, caregiver, and parent for many hours per day. That same teacher’s aide could go to Target, Sheetz, Wawa, or Walmart and instantly get a job paying \$15 per hour. The Commonwealth cannot say that it values our support professionals and the important work they do supporting students while paying them poverty wages. It is shameful and must be remedied.

Young people are doing the cost/benefit analysis as they examine higher education costs, student loans, and the long-term ability to pay off loans and have families. PSEA’s student members tell us how their families attempted to dissuade them from entering the profession. Their families tell them they won’t make enough money. They’ll never be able to pay off their loans and teachers aren’t respected anymore. Additionally, aspiring educators are worried about how they will support themselves during the student teacher experience.

Pennsylvania must incentivize young people to enter the education profession. This includes not only teachers but all professionals that contribute to students’ overall success including reading and math coaches, instructional aides, certified school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and more.

PSEA recommends that the Commonwealth adopt a scholarship program to recruit the next generation of teachers and that student teachers be paid during their “internship.” Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia have at least one program to provide scholarships, grants, stipends, tuition waivers, and/or forgivable loans to students in teacher preparation programs. Meanwhile, 45 percent of today’s educators took out student loans to finance their educations with a total average loan amount of \$55,580.¹³ Pennsylvania just implemented a mental health stipend program a year ago, and the FY 2023-24 budget provides \$10 million to address student teacher stipends.¹⁴ While these recent steps are positive, Pennsylvania lags behind other states.

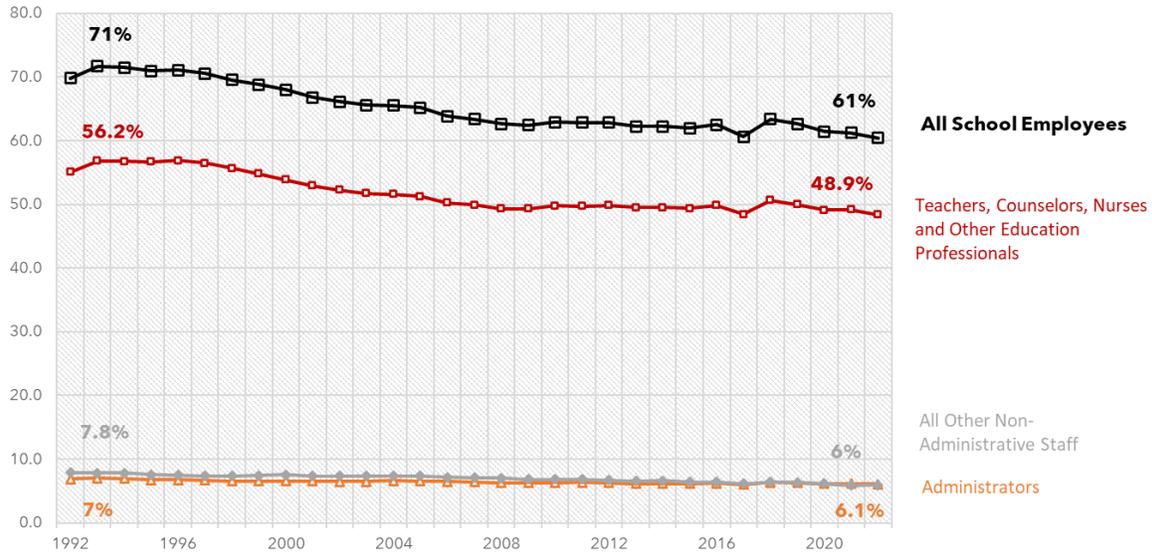
Increasing the universe of future educators is good for every district in the state, but especially those districts that struggle to attract and retain teachers. It is not about a district in Somerset County getting \$300,000 more in funding and a district in Montgomery County getting \$50,000 more. It is about making the education profession attractive to the teachers of tomorrow, so that we have a large pool of people from which schools can hire.

Some might argue that districts and the State can’t afford to spend more on salaries. However, total wages, excluding benefits, paid to all school employees in Pennsylvania are smaller today at 3.6 percent of private sector wages than two decades ago when they averaged just over 5 percent. School district expenditures for salaries and benefits today also have a smaller footprint on total district expenditures. In the early 1990s, total compensation, salaries plus benefits, for all school employees represented **71 percent** of school district expenditures. Today compensation represents **61 percent** of total school district expenditures. By either metric, what we spend as a society to compensate school employees is by no means overly burdensome relative to the recent past.

¹³ “Student Loan Debt Among Educators: A National Crisis.” July 2021. National Education Association and the Center for Enterprise Strategy. <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Student%20Loan%20Debt%20among%20Educators.pdf>.

¹⁴ While the FY 23-24 state budget includes \$10 million for a student teacher stipend program, statutory language to direct how the program be created and operated has yet to be enacted in either a Fiscal or School Code bill.

In the early 1990s, compensation for **all school employees** including teachers, administrators averaged 71% of total district expenditures. Today, those professionals represent 61% of total district expenditures.



Note. Figures are for school districts and include all compensation (salary and benefits). The averages referenced in the title are over the period 1991-92 to 1993-94 and 2019-20 to 2021-22 respectively. The compensation cost shares here are presented at the state level, at the district level compensation cost shares will be lower reflecting state reimbursement for district contributions to social security and PSERS.

Source. PSEA Research based on school district financial data which is collected by the Commonwealth from individual school districts on form PDE-2057.

Education is a people profession, whether you’re talking about students or my committed colleagues from around the state. Most education costs are related to labor. That’s not surprising nor inappropriate. Efforts to reduce labor costs have contributed to the shortage Pennsylvania faces now.

Three years ago, many policymakers argued there was nothing more important than in-person instruction for our students. It is wrong to hold that position then but ignore the educator shortage today - especially when the Commonwealth Court decision specifically identifies staffing as one of the five essential inputs for a thorough and efficient education system.¹⁵

Again, PSEA urges the Commission to address the educator shortage in its final report and make recommendations that will enable Pennsylvania to meet its constitutional obligations. Regardless of how a funding remedy is structured, **all school districts should be required to have a**

¹⁵ William Penn S.D. at 916.

minimum starting salary of \$60,000 and the state should have a comprehensive strategy for recruiting more teachers and support professionals into the field.

Court Input: Courses, Curricula, and other Programs

In one Commission hearing, a question arose: Should the state establish expectations for what courses and programs must be offered? This is a reasonable question given the identification of the input for courses, curricula, and other programs (programs”) in the Court decision¹⁶, as well as the recommendation to establish a base amount and adequacy targets for each school district. There is clearly a need to update expectations for what courses are offered to improve equity in academic opportunities for students across all school districts. Section 1511 of the Public School Code, 24 P.S. Sec. 15-1511, a law that was adopted in 1968 and hasn’t been revised since, prescribes the courses of instruction for elementary schools.

As you know, PSEA has taken great pains to respect Pennsylvania’s standards aligned system in our feedback on many different pieces of legislation over the years. ***Pennsylvania should not abandon our standards aligned system, but rather update the minimum program expectations in conjunction with the enactment of a remedy.*** Expectations for what children should be offered in schools have changed since 1968. Further, since federally mandated standardized testing crowds out subjects, educators want to be sure that students don’t lose out on a comprehensive education. Students need instruction and access to programs in literature, art, music, foreign languages, computer programming, physical education, math, English/Language Arts, biology, chemistry, physics, social studies, community schools, civics, recess, family and consumer science, financial literacy, advanced courses that enable college credit, career and technical education, and more.

School districts should be performing robust reviews of their curricula. It has been PSEA’s observation that a standards aligned curriculum that reflects the latest educational research is often lacking in districts in financial distress. Administrators and boards are doing everything in their power to keep districts operating, and curriculum often falls to the bottom of the list. PDE has regularly contracted with Mass Insight, Inc. to do academic audits of districts in financial recovery. Replacement of outdated and ineffectual curriculum is regularly identified as an

¹⁶ Id. at 911.

improvement that districts need to undertake. The feedback from Mass Insight has been invaluable to these districts. The inclusive approach and comprehensive feedback have provided districts the basis for academic improvements.

Finally, PSEA would note that the ability of districts to offer programs is not only linked to available financial resources, but also to staffing. School entities will be able to make more programs available if there are educators available to staff them. Expanding required programmatic course and program offerings without recognition of the staffing shortage and that teachers are at maximum capacity would be a recipe for disaster.

Court Input: Facilities

In observing the Commission's hearings these past two months, it has been encouraging to witness the collective emerging recognition that school facilities are an essential component of any remedy. Certainly, our members want to see the State reinvest in supporting communities with school construction and renovation projects. Students' learning conditions are educators' working conditions. A teacher recently said to our staff that every day she drives by the new Lampeter-Strasburg Early Learning Center on her way to teach 3rd grade in Lancaster City. And every day she wonders why she can't teach in a beautiful new school.

Some schools have new HVAC systems and air conditioning, and some don't. There are buildings that don't have sufficient restrooms for staff and students. Asbestos-free classrooms, gymnasiums, reliable roofs, safe outdoor space for recess, ADA-compliant buildings, science labs, libraries, offices that aren't closets – all these things seem like they should be foundational for every school. And yet we have students and teachers in facilities that are unsafe and/or don't facilitate learning. I can't answer the questions of why some school districts didn't address facility problems in the past. But as a teacher, I can tell you what it's like to work in a classroom with no air conditioning. Students can't focus and real learning doesn't occur. I can tell you what it's like to teach in an open-pod building – like the one you saw a picture of at the Hazelton hearing. Open pods have multiple classrooms in one large room with cheap partitions separating classes. How can students focus on their lessons from me if they can hear what multiple teachers and 40-some other students are doing as well?

To reach equity in school facilities, three things must occur at the statewide level with absolute haste. First, policymakers need to understand what facility needs currently exist. PSEA urges the Commission to recommend a comprehensive facilities assessment. Second, the Commonwealth should establish appropriate minimum expectations for what makes a school facility safe and conducive for teaching and learning and specifically seek to redress the inequities identified in Judge Jubelirer’s opinion. Third, the State should once again partner with local communities in financially supporting school construction and renovations. PSEA would urge the General Assembly to start that process with HB 1408.

With that said, I’m not 100 percent confident we can leave these decisions entirely in the hands of school boards. Again, I come back to the obligation to resolve inequities. Districts should not be able to allow foundational facilities inadequacies to linger for decades. There should be something to force the hands of districts and the State to ensure that school facilities are properly outfitted and safe for learning.

CONCLUSION

Again, I want to thank the Commission for allowing PSEA to provide our thoughts and recommendations with you today. We look forward to supporting each of you in this bipartisan, bicameral effort to improve Pennsylvania’s school funding system. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to me or our staff if you want to explore our recommendations or other ideas in greater detail as you head into your final deliberations.