

**Budget Testimony of
Representative Steve McCarter
Governor Corbett's 2014-2015 Education Funding Proposal
House Appropriations Budget Hearing: February 27, 2014**

Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss Governor Corbett's proposed 2014-2015 education funding initiative and more specifically, the impact his Ready to Learn Block Grant proposal would have on the three school districts located within my legislative district. I would also like to briefly touch upon the continued diversion of funding away from the basic education subsidy and the state's planning and assistance school infrastructure program, Plan Con.

Upon hearing about the Ready to Learn Block Grant proposal as outlined in Governor Corbett's recent budget address, I sought the guidance of each of our school district's superintendents to gain further clarification about how, if at all, the block grant proposal would help the students in my district.

What I learned, was very interesting. First and foremost, every school district intends to apply for the block grant. However, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDEs) estimations, the amount my individual school districts may receive varies greatly.

For example, the Jenkintown School District would only be eligible to apply for \$33, 214 under the proposed Ready to Learn Block Grant. According to the Jenkintown Superintendent, those funds, if awarded, would be used for further curriculum development to meet the PA Common Core requirements. In reality, Jenkintown needs in the neighborhood of \$60,000 for PA Common Core curriculum development this year and will probably require an additional \$60,000 next year to fully complete the curriculum transition.

Not only will Jenkintown's non-guaranteed share of the Ready to Learn Block Grant not cover the added expense of PA Common Core, it will not even come close to the added expense of the additional teachers they will need to hire for remedial instruction for those students who need extra help passing the Keystone Exams in biology, English and algebra. As I am sure you know, our current students will be required to pass these Keystone Exams prior to high school graduation by the year 2017.

Despite the fact that Jenkintown is a rather small and affluent school district compared to the other districts throughout southeastern Pennsylvania and this Commonwealth, they already have teachers teaching six sessions whereas most other schools have teachers teaching five sessions. They will incur added costs in meeting the Keystone Exam mandate but will not receive any financial support from the state to meet those requirements.

This problem is directly due to Governor Corbett's last three state budgets that, as you know, sorely lacked adequate funding for the basic education subsidy. And, again with this budget, he provides no additional funding for basic education. Instead, he diverts revenue into his new block grant program that will require each of our school districts to apply and compete for these critical dollars.

Much like Jenkintown, the second school district I would like to share with you, Springfield Township, is projected to receive \$104,906. There are 2200 students in Springfield, that amounts to \$47 per student. When weighing the amount of time, planning and cost Springfield will need to exert in the grant application process, that \$47 per student is reduced even further.

The final and largest school district in my area is the Cheltenham school district. Cheltenham is projected to be eligible for \$465,999. While I appreciate this is a sizeable amount of funding, here again, it is the strings attached to this money that gives our school officials pause. There is great need in Cheltenham that does not fall within the purview of the Governor's block grant proposal. Rather, their needs would more easily be corrected by simply increasing the basic education funding subsidy that they could use for the needs they have-- instead of the needs Governor Corbett wants to create.

In addition, Cheltenham is currently struggling with an entire middle school building out of commission due to a mold problem. And, because the state's PlanCon funding option which school districts historically have been able to apply to for relief in such an emergency, is no longer being funded, Cheltenham is now faced with handling this matter on their own. Furthermore, Cheltenham is currently owed \$108,000 from the Commonwealth for two prior PlanCon projects, leaving them with little hope that the state will be of assistance for this new more immediate concern. To its credit, the Cheltenham school district is committed to reopening the middle school but I imagine feels neglected by the state in its duty to our students. What is worse is that Cheltenham is not alone in this struggle. The Corbett administration currently owes school districts throughout this Commonwealth over \$1.2 billion.

I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank Rep. Steve Santarsiero who has been a great advocate and is taking the lead on restoring the PlanCon funding. He, too, has a school district in immediate need of building repairs. This is just yet another example of failed promises for our schools by this administration.

Based on the projected amounts each of my school districts would receive compared to each of their individual needs, the Ready to Learn Block Grant is not a panacea of recovery.

In fact, I would argue it is yet another Harrisburg mandated politically charged sound bite that does little to fully support our schools and our students.

Sadly, I do not understand why the governor seems to have this blanket mistrust of our public schools and their ability to determine the best course of action for their own students. Having taught for over 30 years, I can tell you first hand that our school administrators and teachers go into education because they have an interest or a calling to do so--- and thank goodness they continue to do so in the face of such adversity.

Our forefathers called for a free and adequate education for all children because they knew the inherent value to a thinking, highly functioning society. If other nations are truly beating us in the so called "race to the top," they are only doing so because they continue to invest in, respect and value the educational system.

If we want to produce competitive learners in a global market, then we need to reinstate the respect, support and pride in our citizenry that was the norm not very long ago. Positive reinforcement goes a long way in challenging our students and our teachers to reach higher limits.

I do not think the Ready to Learn Block Grant provides our students, administrators or teachers with enough of that sort of respect and support. Nor do I believe block grant funding restricted to limited uses with limited funds is a wise undertaking for this General Assembly. I strongly urge the Appropriations Committee and the full legislature to give serious consideration to reinstating full PlanCon funding for our school districts to prevent our statewide school infrastructure from becoming a mirror of our roads and bridges crisis throughout this Commonwealth. Likewise, I urge us to consider some of the Governor's policies but in a much broader context that allows our administrators, teachers and students the leeway to use those resources in a way that makes sense for their own school districts versus having to console the governor's politically charged agenda.

Again, I want to sincerely thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present my testimony today. I hope I was able to provide you with an adequate understanding of how Governor Corbett's Ready to Learn Block Grant would influence the three school districts in my legislative district and provide you with some further information about the Governor's education proposal.

Thank you.