

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

EDUCATION COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING

STATE CAPITOL
HARRISBURG, PA

IRVIS OFFICE BUILDING
G-50

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2021
10:06 A.M.

BEFORE:

HONORABLE CURT SONNEY, MAJORITY CHAIRMAN
HONORABLE MARK LONGIETTI, MINORITY CHAIRMAN
HONORABLE ROSEMARY BROWN
HONORABLE VALERIE GAYDOS
HONORABLE MARK M. GILLEN
HONORABLE BARBARA GLEIM
HONORABLE DAVID HICKERNELL
HONORABLE JOSHUA KAIL
HONORABLE ANDREW LEWIS
HONORABLE MILOU MACKENZIE
HONORABLE JASON ORTITAY
HONORABLE MEGHAN SCHROEDER
HONORABLE CRAIG STAATS
HONORABLE JESSE TOPPER
HONORABLE TIM TWARDZIK
HONORABLE JOE CIRESI
HONORABLE CAROL HILL-EVANS
HONORABLE MARY ISAACSON
HONORABLE SUMMER LEE
HONORABLE MAUREEN MADDEN
HONORABLE NAPOLEON NELSON
HONORABLE MICHAEL ZABEL

Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

1 COMMITTEE STAFF PRESENT:

2 CHRISTINE SEITZ
3 REPUBLICAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

4 DANIEL GLATFELTER
5 REPUBLICAN RESEARCH ANALYST

6 CHRISTINE CRONE
7 REPUBLICAN LEGISLATIVE
8 ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT II

9 ERIN DIXON
10 DEMOCRATIC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

11 ALYCIA LAURETI, SR.
12 DEMOCRATIC RESEARCH ANALYST

13 CHRISTOPHER WAKELEY
14 DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION SPECIALIST

15 BOB BROWNAWELL, SR.
16 DEMOCRATIC LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT

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SUBMITTED WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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(See submitted written testimony
and handouts online.)

P R O C E E D I N G S

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MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Good morning.

I would like to call this hearing of the House Education Committee to order. I would like to first welcome everyone that will be testifying here today. I would like to remind everyone that this hearing is being recorded and live-streamed, so that the public can watch. If we experience any technical difficulties, we will recess the hearing until those technical difficulties can be addressed.

For the members and testifiers participating virtually, please mute your microphones until it is your turn to speak. And members, if you want to be recognized for comments and you are attending virtually, please use the raised hand function. After being recognized, but prior to speaking, please turn on your camera and unmute your microphone. After you have completed your questions, please mute your microphone. Each testifier has been asked to limit their testimony to the Committee to three minutes or less and to not read their submitted testimony, so that we will have plenty of time for questions.

In addition to the Committee members that

1 are here in person, we are joined by other members
2 on the virtual platform. I am first going to ask
3 the members that are present to introduce
4 themselves. And then, I will introduce all of those
5 on the virtual platform. So I will begin to my
6 left.

7 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Good morning.
8 Mark Longietti. I serve as the Democratic Chair of
9 the Education Committee for Mercer County.

10 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Good morning.
11 Mary Isaacson, 175th Legislative District,
12 Philadelphia County.

13 REPRESENTATIVE BROWN: Good morning.
14 Rosemary Brown, 189th District, Monroe and Pike
15 Counties.

16 REPRESENTATIVE GAYDOS: Good morning.
17 Valerie Gaydos, 44th District, Allegheny County.

18 REPRESENTATIVE TWARDZIC: Good morning.
19 Tim Twardzic, 123rd District, Schuylkill County.

20 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Good morning. Joe
21 Ciresi, 16th District, Montgomery County.

22 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: Good morning.
23 Craig Staats representing the 145th District in the
24 great County of Bucks.

25 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: And again, I'm

1 Representative Curt Sonney, the majority chairman of
2 the Education Committee.

3 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Representative Mark
4 Gillen, 128th District, Berks, Lancaster Counties.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you. That
6 completes those that are present. I will now read
7 the list of those that are virtual. We have:
8 Representative Gleim, Representative Hickernell,
9 Representative Kail, Representative Lewis,
10 Representative Mackenzie, Representative Ortitay,
11 and Representative Hill-Evans, Representative Lee,
12 and Representative Nelson.

13 I would ask if there are any Committee
14 members that are on virtual that I have not
15 identified, please identify yourselves now.

16 REPRESENTATIVE MADDEN: Good morning.
17 Representative Madden, 115th Legislative District,
18 Monroe county.

19 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.
20 Anyone else? Thank you.

21 The House Education Committee will hear
22 from Pennsylvania's basic education schools on how
23 they are educating their students during the
24 COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring educational goals are
25 being met. As we have said for months. We prefer

1 to see PA's non-cyber charter schools open for full
2 in-person learning. A study from the CDC published
3 last month found little evidence of the virus
4 spreading at schools in the U.S. and a broad when
5 precautions were taken, such as wearing masks,
6 social distancing, and ventilating rooms.

7 We have heard from families directly. And
8 while we know the pandemic has impacted every facet
9 of society, we have concerns for our children and
10 their futures. The difficulties of remote learning
11 and being isolated from their classmates are having
12 an impact on our students' mental health and their
13 academic success. We have also heard from families
14 who wish to send their student to a school providing
15 all in-person instruction in a neighboring school
16 district or non public school, for which they cannot
17 afford the tuition rate.

18 It is not all doom and gloom. Some
19 students have excelled in virtual learning and
20 teachers have stepped up to the challenge of
21 teaching during the pandemic. We look forward to
22 hearing how all of you have met our students'
23 educational needs and recommendations for improving
24 Pennsylvania's education system.

25 Chairman Longietti, do you have any opening

1 remarks?

2 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: First, I want
3 to thank you, Chairman Sonney, for calling this very
4 important hearing. We have a full day of testimony
5 to hear from various folks that are involved in the
6 education of our youngest children. I want to thank
7 the teachers, the support staff, the administrators,
8 the school boards, and the entire school community,
9 including parents and students, for dealing with
10 very unprecedented times.

11 This is something that came upon us
12 quickly, that has evolved over time, and the
13 challenges that have been met thus far, we need to
14 commend folks for their work, particularly those on
15 the front lines and those who are putting their
16 health at risk. We are going to hear today a lot of
17 the challenges that schools face and our students
18 face, and we know that COVID has brought to light
19 some of the inequities that are in our current
20 system and that need to be addressed.

21 So I look forward to the testimony here
22 today, and I think it will help inform us,
23 hopefully, as an Education Committee and as a
24 legislature to do our part to join forces with all
25 of our educational partners to make sure that our

1 students receive the best education possible and
2 have an opportunity to succeed.

3 Thank you, Chairman Sonney.

4 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

5 Okay. We will begin with the Department of
6 Education. So from Department of Education, we have
7 Matthew Stem, who's the Deputy Secretary of the
8 Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, and
9 Dr. Sherri Smith, advisor to the Deputy Secretary,
10 Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

11 I would ask that both of you, if you could,
12 please rise and raise your right hand to be sworn
13 in.

14 (Whereupon, testifiers were sworn en masse.)

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you,
16 Deputy Stem, and you may begin.

17 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you. And
18 good morning, Chairman and Committee members.

19 My name is Matthew Stem, and I serve as the
20 Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary
21 Education at the Pennsylvania Department of
22 Education. I'm joined today by our special advisor,
23 Dr. Sherri Smith. Thank you for holding this
24 hearing and for your continued support in serving
25 our students, educators, and schools. You have my

1 written testimony, but I'd like to summarize a few
2 points before we answer questions.

3 The COVID-19 pandemic has called for
4 extraordinary measures and brought unprecedented
5 change. We at the Department understand the sadness
6 students are feeling at the loss of their
7 traditional school activities, daily routines, and
8 interactions with peers. We understand the
9 frustration caregivers may feel as they manage
10 economic pressures and the challenge of assisting
11 more directly in their student's education. We
12 appreciate the hard work and dedication of our
13 fellow educators working tirelessly to ensure that
14 students and families continue to be well-served.

15 The Department's primary role this past
16 year has been to support all of our schools as they
17 navigate this uncertain and ever-changing
18 environment. Since the beginning of the pandemic,
19 the Department of Education has collaborated with
20 the Department of Health to provide schools with
21 guidance, resources, and tools that reflect the most
22 current COVID-19 data, science, and research, and to
23 keep schools apprised of changes at the State and
24 federal level.

25 PDE staff also meet regularly with

1 education leaders and organizations throughout the
2 State concerning our evidence-based guidance and
3 recommendations. These conversations are critical
4 and keep us grounded in the challenges and
5 opportunities facing our local school communities
6 and have been used to inform State policy efforts
7 and target resources and supports. As I mentioned
8 in our written testimony, the Department has relied
9 on strong partnerships to navigate the pandemic and
10 provide statewide support.

11 The unwavering collaboration of the State's
12 29 intermediate units has been critical in providing
13 communication and assistance to school districts,
14 charter schools, and non-public schools. PDE also
15 worked to assist schools and families to bridge the
16 digital divide by partnering with PBS, as well as
17 expanding assistance through Commonwealth libraries.
18 Other Commonwealth agencies, such as the Departments
19 of Human Services and Agriculture have assisted
20 schools to provide free meals to students, even when
21 they aren't in school learning with their friends
22 and teachers.

23 In addition to partnering with the
24 Department of Health to provide schools with various
25 pieces of health and safety guidance, PDE also

1 created the Roadmap for Education Leaders, an online
2 hub of resources, research, and strategies to assist
3 school leaders in creating equitable learning
4 systems during the challenges of mitigating
5 COVID-19. This work will continue this spring with
6 the launch of a series of resources and webinars
7 that provide guidance to local education agencies
8 and schools in mitigating learning gaps of students
9 in our accelerated learning segment of the Roadmap
10 work.

11 We recognize that there's no precedent for
12 what we're asking of our schools, and it's not an
13 easy task, but it's our collective moral
14 responsibility to do all we can to ensure equity and
15 opportunity for Pennsylvania students. Quite
16 simply, our goal is to create the conditions to
17 return students to in-person instruction as soon as
18 possible and as safely as possible. There's much to
19 be done in the weeks and months ahead to accomplish
20 this task, and we are committed to working with
21 lawmakers, partner agencies, and other stakeholders
22 as we move forward together.

23 So with that, Dr. Smith and I are happy to
24 take questions from the Committee.

25 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

1 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you.

2 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: I'll offer the
3 first question. I'd like to know if you are
4 requiring and/or receiving reporting data from all
5 of our schools on how they are operating?

6 In other words, do you know which schools
7 are, you know, offering in-person, you know, how
8 often that they've been temporarily closed because
9 of a COVID incident, how many are not operating at
10 all, except for virtual?

11 You know, are you aware of that count and
12 how that operation has been spread across the entire
13 system?

14 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yes. Thank you for
15 that question, Chairman. There are a couple of ways
16 that we've been monitoring and tracking the
17 instructional models that schools have been using
18 throughout the Commonwealth. And as you and members
19 know, certainly, this changes on a week-to-week
20 basis as schools modify their models.

21 But first and foremost, we collected
22 information from all schools in December that were
23 intending on offering any in-person instruction to
24 ensure that they were committing to having
25 mitigation strategies in place, and we've updated

1 that with districts continuing to report when they
2 -- when they change and are entering into in-person
3 instruction. But I think what's been even more
4 helpful than that collection has been -- and I had
5 mentioned earlier the partnering with our
6 intermediate units -- our 29 intermediate units have
7 been assisting us by weekly providing updates to the
8 Department on what's happening with the public
9 schools in their catchment areas, and we've been
10 tracking that data on a weekly basis to have a sense
11 of what's happening in instructional models across
12 our schools.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: And have you
14 been able to identify at all on the spread of COVID
15 within the schools whether it was more
16 student-related or teacher-related.

17 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yes. That would be
18 an area that, you know, as we engage and partner
19 with the Department of Health, those are not data
20 sets that we at the Department collect or have
21 access to. So I would have to defer on that
22 specific information to -- to our partners at the
23 Department of Health. But I do know that they do
24 certainly collect county level and ZIP code level
25 data on what's happening with transmission in

1 schools. And I do know that they also collect data
2 that's aggregated by age.

3 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.
4 Representative Staats.

5 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: Thank you,
6 Mr. Chairman. And thank you to our panel for your
7 time today.

8 we're all concerned with the long-term
9 effects of students being pushed out of schools
10 because of COVID. And while some believe that the
11 unplanned and rapid move to online learning with no
12 training, insufficient bandwidth, and little
13 preparation will result in a poor user experience
14 that's not conducive to sustain growth, some others
15 believe that a new hybrid model of education will
16 emerge with significant benefits. And I'd like to
17 get your thoughts on that.

18 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yes, Thank you,
19 Representative. That's a great question, and I
20 think that's one of the things that we've learned
21 throughout the pandemic. And I think you framed it
22 very well. At the onset roughly a year ago, for
23 many districts it was quite a pivot into -- into a
24 new learning environment. And certainly, the
25 Department has done everything we can to support

1 that shift into remote learning. But what we've
2 also learned this year is that there are a number of
3 students -- and we've already heard from our
4 superintendents on an almost weekly basis as we meet
5 with them -- that there are a number of students
6 that are finding distance learning to be a preferred
7 learning modality, that as their districts have
8 really become more sophisticated throughout the
9 pandemic in delivering those services, I think to
10 your point, we are now learning that there's sort of
11 -- we're reimagining what learning could look like
12 and some flexibilities that didn't prior exist.

13 And so we look forward to supporting
14 districts throughout the remainder of this year and
15 into next year on how to continue to provide that
16 level of flexibility and to continue to increase the
17 quality in those offerings.

18 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: Can you tell us how
19 students performed in the fall of 2020 relative to a
20 typical school year?

21 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: So at the
22 Department of Ed, in Pennsylvania, we have not
23 historically ever collected local assessment data
24 and that's the type of data that is generated and
25 collected at the local level. And so while in our

1 school improvement space we have teams that work
2 closely with a smaller set of schools on that
3 localized data, at this point, what our team is
4 looking into is we're engaging research partners and
5 -- as well as another partner in the work to gather
6 local assessment data to better inform the trends
7 that have been happening.

8 So to this point, we've had to rely on some
9 national and international data sets. And what
10 those data sets seem to pretty consistently reveal
11 is that the pandemic has had a disproportionate
12 impact in a couple of areas: one, students that are
13 historically marginalized populations seem to have
14 data in the fall and throughout the year that's
15 exhibiting greater gaps. Also, you know, students
16 with special needs and English learners have also
17 seen disproportionate impacts. And then our
18 youngest children, you know, primary age,
19 kindergarten, first, second, third grade, seem --
20 the emerging research seems to suggest that that's
21 where some of the greater gaps have been realized.

22 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: I appreciate that.
23 Thank you.

24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Next will be

1 Representative Gaydos.

2 REPRESENTATIVE GAYDOS: Thank you,
3 Mr. Chairman. And to our panelists, I appreciate
4 you taking the time to be here.

5 My particular House district has four
6 different school districts, and there's four
7 different models. We have Quaker Valley, West
8 Allegheny, Moon Township, and Avonworth. And West
9 Allegheny is -- has been going full-time since the
10 -- since summer, actually, of last year. And Moon
11 has remained only on virtual.

12 So does the Department have plans to try to
13 collect the information and try to share it for best
14 practices? Because clearly, there are some school
15 districts that are getting it right and remain
16 having low COVID cases.

17 So what are we doing to share that with
18 other school districts to try to get our kids back
19 in school?

20 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yeah. Thank you,
21 Representative, for that question. So it's really
22 interesting to hear. Again, what you're
23 experiencing, I think we could say, could be
24 generalized throughout the Commonwealth. So as
25 Dr. Smith who's here testifying with me, you know,

1 one of the things that she and I have learned as
2 lifelong educators is that experiences through --
3 not only throughout the Commonwealth, but even in
4 specific regions -- can vary greatly from region to
5 region and even district to district within a
6 region.

7 And so a couple of the things that we've
8 been doing to help share best practices. So first,
9 we have -- we engage regularly with our school
10 district leaders. And we do these on calls by
11 regions, in which we touch base with school leaders
12 and they sort of share some of their struggles and
13 some of their opportunities in a way that's, you
14 know, with dozens of other school leaders on these
15 calls, including superintendents as well as charter
16 school directors and CTC directors.

17 But more importantly, we are leading teams
18 through the Department. So right now, we have a
19 distance learning initiative that we are leading
20 with a subset of schools that is providing not only
21 technical assistance, but also is gathering
22 information that we can use as part of our Roadmap
23 for equitable access to quality instruction. And so
24 these are going to be resources that we stand up at
25 a State level.

1 I'm going to briefly turn, if I may, to
2 Dr. Sherri Smith and see if there's anything that
3 she wanted to add here that I -- that I might not
4 have hit.

5 DR. SMITH: Thank you. Thank you for the
6 opportunity, Deputy Secretary Stem. So just to talk
7 about a few other things through our accelerated
8 learning work that we're establishing for our
9 schools, one of the things that we're providing
10 through our Roadmap network is that we provide
11 opportunities for our schools to come together. One
12 of the things that we recognize is that schools
13 learn best sometimes from their colleagues from
14 other schools and share best practices.

15 So part of our Roadmap work that we've
16 engaged in over the last month and a half with our
17 schools is problems and practice and allowing our
18 schools to have opportunities to get in breakout
19 rooms and share with one another. And that's our
20 goal through the accelerated learning, is through
21 work groups where we allow our schools to engage in
22 those conversations together.

23 I'd also like to point out that our --
24 through our intermediate unit colleagues, they've
25 been meeting regionally with their -- with their

1 schools in that area to share practice and
2 opportunities with one another because we're all
3 learning as we go through these unprecedented times
4 this year. And some of us have, I think, some
5 special skill areas that we learn in our schools
6 that we can share with one another and grow from one
7 another.

8 REPRESENTATIVE GAYDOS: Thank you very
9 much.

10 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
11 Ciresi.

12 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you. And
13 thank you for being here today.

14 I have a question similar to Representative
15 Staat's question on the regression of our students
16 and how we're handling the future of PSSAs, all of
17 our assessments. And then, do we know for sure that
18 our students are meeting the 990 hours through this
19 year? Because I have a feeling that some schools
20 may be falling behind on that.

21 And you know, how are we going to handle
22 this in the future? Because schools are never going
23 to be able to ramp up within a year and try to get
24 back to where they were before. So what is the plan
25 through PDE to move this forward?

1 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure. So let me --
2 I'll try to work in reverse order. And
3 Representative, if we miss any -- I think there were
4 a few questions in there. If we miss any, please
5 make sure you flag those for us. We want to answer
6 everything you teed up.

7 So in terms of the 990 hour, 180 day
8 requirements -- or 900 hours at the elementary
9 level -- one of the things that we've done
10 throughout the pandemic is, you know, affirm to
11 districts that we are still collecting their
12 attendance data. And I know we keep bringing up our
13 Roadmap, but on our Roadmap, we have an attendance
14 and engagement guide that talks to districts about
15 how to monitor attendance, even in remote learning,
16 and what -- and how to count those hours. It's not
17 even just about logging in, but we've made it about
18 the engagement and work that gets completed.

19 So we created that guide. Districts are
20 following that, and they still are required to
21 submit their hours to the State to put in our
22 system. And one of the, you know, one of the pieces
23 of evidence that we also have of that is that
24 districts have been reaching out to us for support
25 in the area of truancy. And so we've been working

1 with the Department of Human Services and bringing
2 some of the county workers together with educators
3 because educators are trying to stay on top of
4 attendance and are finding students that they're
5 having, you know, that they need to follow up with
6 and engage. So that's -- that's that piece of it.

7 In terms of the learning gaps, maybe to
8 speak just very briefly a little bit more about some
9 of the research we're engaging in, Pennsylvania has
10 received an IES grant, which is an arm of the U.S.
11 Department of Education. And we're probably going
12 to be better positioned than most states because of
13 this two-year grant and partnership with IES. We're
14 going to be looking at the effects of COVID in four
15 areas: the impacts on early childhood, the impacts
16 on teacher pipeline, the impacts on teaching and
17 learning, and -- I apologize, I'm doing it from
18 memory -- I think the last one is the impacts on
19 social and emotional -- social and emotional
20 impacts.

21 Those are the four areas of research that
22 we are going to be positioning. And again, I think
23 we are one of the only states to receive that grant
24 and funding to pursue that work.

25 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you.

1 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: I feel like I might
2 have missed one of your other questions.

3 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Yes, PSSAs. How
4 are we going to handle the PSSAs, and really the
5 keystones of the future with what we've just gone
6 through?

7 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Oh, okay. Thank
8 you, Representative. That's a very, very timely
9 question.

10 So yesterday -- so on February 12th, the
11 Department put out -- and I put out from my office
12 an update to the field related to PSSAs and
13 keystones in the spring. And at that time, we let
14 the field know that we were still looking for
15 additional guidance from the U.S. Department of
16 Education because these assessments are still
17 required. Yesterday, the U.S. Department of
18 Education did provide updated guidance. And so our
19 team was prepared to issue a letter for public
20 comment, and that actually has gone up this morning.

21 And Representative, we were able to share a
22 little bit with some staffers yesterday. And then I
23 believe this morning we also just pushed out some
24 additional information. So this is all realtime.
25 But in the public comment letter that we posted, in

1 response to what USDE updated in their guidance,
2 what we are anticipating doing is extending our
3 testing window through the summer and straight into
4 the first month of next school year to provide the
5 conditions where districts can administer their PSSA
6 and Keystone exams, but do so without forcing
7 teachers and educators into buildings where they may
8 still be in remote learning.

9 So I don't want to take too much time, but
10 would be happy to answer more questions on that and
11 we will be pushing out more guidance with greater
12 details within the days and weeks ahead.

13 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you.

14 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: I would like to
15 announce that we have been joined here at the
16 hearing by Representative Zabel.

17 The next question will be from
18 Representative Ortitay.

19 REPRESENTATIVE ORTITAY: Thank you,
20 Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Deputy Secretary, for
21 being here.

22 I had a question about guidance from the
23 Department of Education to all the school districts.
24 When was the last time guidance was changed or
25 updated?

1 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure. And
2 Representative, can you just clarify which guidance
3 you might be referring to?

4 Is it academic guidance or is it more COVID
5 mitigation, health-related guidance?

6 REPRESENTATIVE ORTITAY: COVID-related and
7 health mitigation.

8 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Okay. The last
9 updates or -- I mean, we routinely put out guidance
10 on a -- on an almost weekly basis, but maybe I would
11 say a more precise answer would be the last change
12 that was made to any of our instructional model
13 guidance was -- would have been, I believe, the
14 first week of January at which time we added, along
15 with our partners in the Department of Health, we
16 added elementary students in blended learning to our
17 recommendations under substantial transmission.

18 REPRESENTATIVE ORTITAY: Are you
19 anticipating any major changes? Are there new
20 changes coming in the near future?

21 Or if you have any in the works, could you
22 lay them out for us?

23 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure. No. Thank
24 you for that question.

25 So last week, the CDC released -- they

1 released updates to their national guidance around
2 instructional models, around mitigation strategies.
3 And our team, along with our partners in the
4 Department of Health have been combing through that
5 guidance since it was released a week ago Friday.
6 And we are certainly considering potential changes
7 to our system based on the CDC's updates.

8 One of the things that we've done since
9 last March when everything started is we've really,
10 again, under the Department of Health's lead, tried
11 to follow as closely as possible recommendations
12 that come out from the CDC. So with these
13 recommendations from a week and a half ago, we are
14 definitely processing them and considering the
15 impacts on our current recommendations.

16 REPRESENTATIVE ORTITAY: Do you think --
17 do you think any of that is going to happen in the
18 next month, two months, before the school year is
19 out?

20 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: I think -- I think
21 our goal would definitely be to make revisions in a,
22 you know -- if we were going to make any, to do so
23 in an expedited way because the teaching and
24 learning time is so important this spring. So if
25 there 's anything we can do to create the conditions

1 to foster safe in-person instruction and more of it,
2 we would -- we would be included to do that.

3 REPRESENTATIVE ORTITAY: Okay. Thank you.
4 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
6 Isaacson.

7 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Thank you.

8 My question is with regard to what we might
9 face as we learn more about where students are after
10 this year with, whether it was hybrid or home
11 learning. I think we may find that many of the
12 students are going to need remedial assistance over
13 the summer, so they can move onto the next school
14 year so that we can continue down the educational
15 path and doing -- and providing the education that
16 they deserve.

17 Have you thought about how we're going to
18 handle this and what kind of support and resources
19 are going to be needed by the different school
20 districts, should they need additional educational
21 situations for the summer, which I'm sure is not
22 part of their, necessarily, their anticipated budget
23 projections right now?

24 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure. Thank you,
25 Representative.

1 I'll start the answer to this question, and
2 I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Smith to elaborate
3 a little bit further. But to your point,
4 absolutely, we know that districts are contemplating
5 a myriad of ways that they can, you know, both
6 accelerate learning and address potential learning
7 gaps that have emerged over the past year. And
8 they're going to look a lot of different ways. You
9 named summer. That's absolutely one space that many
10 districts are looking at. Other are looking at
11 extended school days and, you know, extended school
12 year calendars and similar.

13 School districts, it is -- those are
14 encouraged activities under the federal funding, the
15 Federal CARES Act funding, both rounds that came
16 out. So districts -- to the budget part of your
17 question -- districts can certainly use and leverage
18 their federal funding towards those types of
19 activities. And then, in terms of support, let me
20 just turn it over to Dr. Smith to tell a little bit
21 more about how we can support districts with those
22 efforts.

23 DR. SMITH: Thank you. So yeah, glad to.

24 So again, I'm going to go back to the
25 accelerated learning work that we're doing. So I

1 think one of the things that we want to provide for
2 is a process and system to put into place to help
3 our schools, no matter where they are in process.
4 We all know all of our schools are in different
5 places with the way they, you know, lead in their
6 schools. So we have -- we need to start with our
7 assessments and ensuring that where are those
8 learning gaps for our students based on, you know,
9 the impacts of COVID mitigation efforts this year.

10 And based on those, then schools can --
11 we're going to assist them in developing now how
12 they take a look at their curriculum and how they
13 take a look at their instruction. So not only do we
14 want to help our schools in looking at how they
15 provide summer programs and after-school programs,
16 there's also a concern of them looking within their
17 classrooms and their education for next year so that
18 they integrate missing skills that students may have
19 missed during this -- this past year.

20 So we want schools to provide that guidance
21 and those processes and systems, so that they can
22 take a look within their own schools and look at how
23 they can mitigate all those concerns. So our hope
24 is to roll that work out in April and May, which
25 would then provide them the opportunity to then look

1 internally as to do they want to do that through
2 summer programs or -- and how they want to change
3 and update their curriculum instruction in the
4 classroom next year for all students.

5 so hopefully we are on a fast track for
6 mitigating any of the missing skills that students
7 may have occurred this past year.

8 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Thank you. And
9 I'm glad to hear that you are already planning for
10 that because I think it will be inevitable. And
11 just real quick, and then I'm done, is the
12 Department of Education working with the Department
13 of Health to try and prioritize educators and staff
14 with regard to getting access to vaccines?

15 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yeah. Thank you.
16 Thank you for that question.

17 So absolutely, we are partnering with the
18 Department of Health. You know, we've partnered
19 more closely with the Department of Health -- I've
20 been at the Department now for six years and this
21 past year, we've forged more relationships for sure
22 than ever before. And we collaborate on a daily
23 basis.

24 One of the things that I know that's been
25 launched -- and I want to make sure that I get the

1 term right because it's so recent -- but I know that
2 there's the creation of the COVID-19 vaccine, the
3 legislative task force. And I know that the
4 Governor and the administration want to hear and
5 collaborate with members around vaccine rollout in
6 various communities. And so we stand positioned at
7 the Department of Ed to inform and provide any
8 information, including the things that we learn from
9 all of the superintendents and charter leaders and
10 others that we work with all of the time to help
11 inform those decisions that are being made.

12 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Thank you.

13 And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
15 Brown.

16 REPRESENTATIVE BROWN: Thank you,
17 Mr. Chairman.

18 And Deputy Secretary Stem, very good to see
19 you. Dr. Smith, thank you very much. And you know,
20 I'm going to say AEDs to you, because I know we talk
21 about defibrillators all the time. So I'm going to
22 remind you about that right now.

23 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure.

24 REPRESENTATIVE BROWN: Listen, the other
25 thing that I wanted to follow up real quickly with

1 is Representative Ciresi talked about the testing
2 and the Keystone exams and PSSAs. And I just want
3 to throw it out at you as far as the special
4 education piece of that with the Keystone exams,
5 I've been in some conversations with some educators
6 who deal with special education, and obviously,
7 we're -- that Keystone exam is grade-based. And
8 sometimes with a special education, as you know, or
9 an IEP, the teaching is not teaching to that level
10 and then they're being tested on that level. That's
11 a very big concern and something that I'll probably
12 be approaching and looking at as we move forward,
13 but just to put that in your heads a little bit. I
14 think that's something that needs to be
15 realistically looked at for the betterment of the
16 student, the teacher, and for the families, as well.

17 But my question really comes down to the
18 fact of the difficulties with COVID. Obviously, I
19 don't believe we were really -- no one was ready for
20 this, but technology has really been improved over
21 the years tremendously. And I often think about if
22 we were up to date, and our school systems and our
23 teachers were up to date with technology and
24 trained, could we have better handled this more
25 quickly and could our students have more quickly

1 adjusted, and the teachers more quickly adjusted, to
2 not have these shortfalls that we're dealing with?

3 And listen, I know even myself, technology
4 is tough to keep up with and I do what I can within
5 my job to utilize it the best that I can, but there
6 are definitely varying levels among people and among
7 teachers as far as their expertise with technology,
8 and students, too. But I think our students are
9 almost better than us with technology, right?

10 So my question is, what now are we doing to
11 get the teachers to the technology levels that they
12 need to get to -- as you talked with Representative
13 Staats about -- with the hybrid program, and even
14 when we're back in the classroom, being able to
15 utilize this technology in the classroom, outside of
16 the classroom, however we need to?

17 Are the unions helping you, the Department
18 of Education jumping in? I think the teachers had
19 just as much of a difficult time as the students
20 did. So can you help us understand a little bit
21 about what's going to happen there and where we are
22 going to come together as a team from all aspects of
23 technology?

24 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure.

25 REPRESENTATIVE BROWN: Sorry for the long

1 question.

2 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure.

3 Representative, good to see you, at least virtually
4 here again.

5 So two thoughts, maybe a little bit of a
6 lookback and a look forward. So your points are
7 very well taken. And we've certainly observed
8 throughout the pandemic that, you know, districts
9 have been in different places, like Dr. Smith said,
10 on the continuum of distance learning. And it's
11 more than just the technology. The technology is a
12 part of it, but it's also the pedagogy that goes
13 around it. Like, how do you teach, how does it look
14 different, what strategies do you engage when you're
15 using technology that look a little bit different
16 than the classroom?

17 So as a lookback, one of the things that
18 we've done recently -- and we're already positioned
19 in some respects -- is at PDE, we have online
20 courses that teachers get continuing education
21 credits for. And in recent years, we've added
22 courses on e-learning into that -- into that
23 platform on our SAS professional development portal.
24 And those are free of charge for any educator to be
25 able to take those courses. And so we've certainly

1 provided some of those over the years. I would
2 maintain that we have much work to be done in that
3 space, but it's been -- it has positioned us, at
4 least heading in, for some resources that were
5 existing.

6 But I think more importantly, moving
7 forward, as I mentioned, we have a team that's
8 working on distance learning, which is a part of our
9 Roadmap work. And that team is leading -- I want to
10 say we have roughly 30 pilots throughout the
11 Commonwealth right now, where school-based teams are
12 working with our team on expanding the quality of
13 distance learning. And part of that, as Dr. Smith
14 said before, is engaging those teams together and
15 doing idea sharing so that we continue, can scale
16 these up Commonwealth-wide.

17 So Dr. Smith, I don't know if you wanted to
18 add anything to that?

19 DR. SMITH: Yeah. So you know, I think
20 that's where we take a look at the lessons learned
21 and the opportunities that have occurred through the
22 situations. Absolutely, you know, one of the things
23 I think we all know is schools are very different
24 across the state. And therefore, where they were in
25 technology, just as in other areas, is differential,

1 depending on where you live and that.

2 So one of the things that we can engage is
3 the lessons that we've learned, and the great things
4 that I think our teachers have grown in the area of
5 distance learning and virtual learning and capture
6 those, and then provide opportunities. And as we
7 move into a new school next year, what do we learn
8 from this? We don't want to forget those lessons,
9 and we want to incorporate some of the skills and
10 the -- that we've learned over this past year, so
11 that we're more effectively meeting the needs of all
12 students.

13 So you know, we're going to look at where
14 those opportunities are and grow from that. And
15 then -- I absolutely agree with you. You know, the
16 technology, education, and professional learning
17 that our teachers will continue to need, so that we
18 can ensure all students have the same opportunities
19 is something that is our goal, and we'll continue to
20 provide opportunities for our school leaders and
21 teachers to get professional learning on.

22 REPRESENTATIVE BROWN: Thank you.

23 And I definitely feel it needs to be almost
24 where pushed out of your comfort zone. So you know,
25 when teachers can choose, I'm for that, as well.

1 But I do think there needs to be sort of a mandated
2 push to accomplish some of these courses that are
3 not always comfortable, you know, depending on how
4 the teacher, you know, is trained or how many years
5 they've worked in the school district. So I'd like
6 to see a little bit more of that as you continue
7 with your work.

8 So thank you so much. Appreciate it.

9 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you. And
11 I'd just like to do a real quick follow up on
12 Representative Brown's questioning. Have you -- has
13 the Department engaged with our public cyber charter
14 schools at all throughout this to find out best
15 practices that can be in turn, you know, delivered
16 back to our public schools?

17 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Dr. Smith, do you
18 want to take this one?

19 DR. SMITH: Sure. So you know, one of the
20 things that I will tell you that the Deputy
21 Secretary and I have in our meetings is, you know,
22 we invite all of our partners. And so I'm hopeful
23 that all of our school districts and our other
24 charter -- brick and mortar charters have learned
25 and, you know, have gone directly to our cyber

1 friends and engaged and learned from them. In some
2 of the conversations that we've had with our cyber
3 charter CEOs, I know that they have honestly
4 provided those opportunities for them.

5 So we can learn from them. But I will tell
6 you that when this all started and we were looking
7 at attendance and truancy and some practices in that
8 regard, they were some of the first individuals that
9 we reached out to provide us with models and
10 opportunities because obviously, you know, they've
11 tried and tested some of that work over many, many
12 years. So absolutely, you know, they've been a good
13 resources, I think, to assisting us in how to do
14 virtual learning.

15 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you. Thank
16 you, Dr. Smith.

17 And I would just add that for our cyber
18 charters, just like all schools, everyone has much
19 to learn in this space. And as Dr. Smith said, the
20 attendance and truancy reports have been really
21 helpful. And I think that we view it as our role at
22 the Department to ensure that all cyber efforts are
23 producing outcomes that we would -- we would view as
24 quality for all students. And I think our cyber
25 partners would agree with us that all of us,

1 including our cyber charters, are still on that
2 journey to increasing quality.

3 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.
4 Representative Nelson.

5 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: Thank you. I
6 appreciate the time. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 I'm really interested right now -- I think
8 one of the areas that COVID has really expressed to
9 us is obviously the difficulty that our districts
10 are having in finding substitutes, but also the
11 disconnect sometimes that we usually don't think
12 about between educational institutions as providing
13 instruction and educational institutions as
14 basically providing just child care. And to the
15 extent that our districts are having a really
16 difficult time in trying to navigate a hybrid
17 environment where they are trying to provide child
18 care while they have, perhaps, some sort of a
19 blended or online educational instruction component,
20 many of our districts, particularly in the upper
21 grades, the high schools, are finding challenges
22 because if they have a certified instructional need
23 that is being met virtually, do they need to also
24 have then someone in the classroom physically
25 present with students who meets that same

1 certification requirement, right?

2 So how do you guys guide many of our
3 districts on the disconnect there and how they can
4 try and find a path forward to provide in-person
5 care while also providing the high quality
6 instruction, oftentimes that requires some level of
7 certification that they're having a hard time
8 staffing, much less finding substitutes for?

9 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yes. Thank you,
10 Representative.

11 And you've really hit a key issue. You
12 know, there's a handful of themes that come up every
13 time we engage with our school leaders, and this is
14 one of them, the human capital challenges that have
15 emerged in this -- in this, you know, different
16 environment that we're operating in right now. And
17 unfortunately, there aren't any easy answers to
18 that, but as with all problems at our schools, and
19 challenges and opportunities that they're facing,
20 what we've done is try and create the spaces for
21 group problem solving.

22 So we have a team right now that's working
23 specifically on human capital and human capital
24 strategies for schools. They are working directly
25 with about 300 schools that are -- that are in some

1 level of school improvement, but taking those
2 experiences and, again, generalizing them to the
3 broader populations. And so there have been some
4 innovative strategies that some districts have been
5 able to incorporate, but -- but it's still an area
6 that, as you point out, I think, you know, remains a
7 struggle for many. And we hope to continue to share
8 more of those innovative strategies.

9 For example, you know, grouping students
10 differently, so that maybe, you know, one teacher is
11 working with what would have historically been two
12 or three classes and they sort of become one class,
13 and then another teacher that's taking the virtual.
14 It's taking some reimagining and some flexibility,
15 though, to be sure.

16 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: And does any of
17 that flexibility require a legislative solution,
18 right? so please make sure that you're working with
19 us in that space where, you know, perhaps some of
20 our kind of rules and requirements have not provided
21 that flexible solution finding on the ground within
22 our school districts.

23 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: We -- we would
24 absolutely welcome that opportunity to work with
25 members on tackling additional flexibilities in that

1 space. Appreciate the opportunity.

2 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

3 I'd like to announce that Representative
4 Schroeder is also in attendance at the meeting.

5 The next question will be by Representative
6 Gillen.

7 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you, Deputy
8 Secretary. Thank you Dr. Smith.

9 As you follow the news, I'm sure you're
10 interested to see that there's the \$1.9 trillion
11 stimulus package winding its way through Congress.
12 It looks more and more likely that there will be a
13 significant pot of money coming in for K-12.

14 Are there recommendations or tactics you
15 are disseminating to our educational partners
16 relative to the use of what would likely be one-time
17 money?

18 And so this would, I think, mitigate
19 against hearing about, in some future budget year,
20 cuts that have come; rather this money is destined
21 for a specific silo for specific use for a narrow
22 period of time. What would be best practices for
23 the use of what, prospectively, is one-time money?

24 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yeah, really,
25 really appreciate that question, Representative.

1 Thank you.

2 And this is a space where we can engage
3 with our partners, as you mentioned, you know, PASBO
4 and others that are organizations that work with
5 schools in this space. But I'm again going to turn
6 it over to Sherri here to talk a little bit. I know
7 that she's been working with our team on this very
8 issue.

9 DR. SMITH: Thank you. Yeah, this is
10 honestly a very critical issue, and one that I think
11 we need to continue to provide greater guidance to
12 assist our schools in that. So you've indicated
13 these are one-time dollars, and I think that that,
14 you know, ensuring that our schools know how to
15 balance that in their budgets to mitigate some of
16 their income that they've not received this past
17 year, year and a half, based on some of the, you
18 know, local impacts are some of the things that we
19 need to engage our partners in, and recognizing that
20 these federal dollars do stretch across several
21 years.

22 So how are you using those dollars to
23 mitigate your losses in income so that you're not
24 taking away opportunities for students, a and b?

25 And then, looking at some of the mitigation

1 strategies, so like we indicated the summer
2 programs, after-school programs, those additional
3 opportunities for students that they're going to
4 need to make sure that we quickly and most
5 effectively mitigate any of the learning gaps that
6 our students have had this past year. And again,
7 all the strategies, right, the additional busing
8 necessary for some of the strategies that they're
9 doing and cleaning, and additional cleaning.

10 And all of the additional types of costs
11 are ways and things that we look at our schools
12 using those dollars for. Obviously, when any of the
13 stimulus dollars come to us from the USDE, they come
14 with allowable uses. So obviously that's their
15 first benchmark from that, but you know, we would
16 like to in the near future, particularly with these
17 new dollars that are coming our way, provide some
18 webinars and additional opportunities to our school
19 leaders to help them in some of the decisionmaking
20 on how to most effectively use these dollars to
21 ensure our students have a solid education moving
22 forward.

23 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you.

24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

1 I know that our second panel is teed up and
2 ready. So we will have two more questions, and then
3 we will move on.

4 So the next question will come from
5 Representative Gleim.

6 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Hello. Thank you
7 all for being here today. I really appreciate the
8 work that you've been doing.

9 I have been working with you all on some
10 legislation for substitute teachers, but my question
11 -- and I just want to continue what Representative
12 Nelson had started on real quickly because of what
13 Representative Ciresi said about over-the-summer
14 work, that you might be extending into that time. I
15 mean, obviously, our biggest goal is to get the kids
16 back to school. And we want to do that as quickly
17 as possible.

18 I was just wondering if you all are
19 anticipating a certain level of staffing problems
20 once we start school back up again, and if you are
21 thinking of relaxing any of your requirements right
22 now for substitute teachers on into the summer?

23 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Yeah. Thank you,
24 Representative. And thank you for the work that
25 you're already doing in this space.

1 I think, you know, at the risk of echoing
2 what we had shared before -- so two things. One is,
3 I think the trends are just starting to emerge right
4 now. And I think the data that continues to come in
5 is going to be evidence of what type of an impact
6 we've seen at both the teaching and administrative
7 levels. Anecdotally, you know, we have anecdotal
8 information that districts are struggling with, you
9 know, maybe an increase in retirements and those
10 sorts of things that have occurred, again, at both
11 the teaching and administrative levels. And in the
12 weeks and months ahead, you know, the data sets are
13 going to play out to what extent, what the true
14 impact is.

15 And so, as I said before, this is one of
16 the highest priorities for educational leaders. It
17 comes up every time that Sherri and I are on calls
18 with our school district leaders. And any
19 opportunity that we have to partner with members,
20 yourself and others, on this issue, we would really
21 welcome that opportunity.

22 DR. SMITH: I --

23 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Oh, I'm sorry. Go
24 ahead.

25 DR. SMITH: I'm sorry. I just wanted to

1 add, you know, Representative, that the one thing
2 that I think that we can honestly say is this is not
3 going to just be a this year issue or a next year
4 issue. We're going to have to mitigate some teacher
5 shortages over the next few years. So you know,
6 recruiting and getting more of our folks into the
7 teaching field and such are other ways that I think
8 we need to continue to have on our agendas to make
9 sure that, you know, we can properly staff our
10 classrooms as quickly as possible.

11 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: And I would just
12 request that any data that you all receive on that
13 type of -- if you're collecting it -- that we could
14 get a copy of it.

15 Thank you.

16 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Sure. We'll be
17 happy to share anything as, you know, as that
18 emerges. Okay. Thank you.

19 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Thank you.

20 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Next up we have
21 Chairman Longietti.

22 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you.

23 Back on assessments. So I know the U.S.
24 Department of Ed's guidance now is it's there to be
25 used more for targeting resources and support rather

1 than for accountability purposes. In that vein, two
2 things, one, when are test results or assessment
3 results going to be back to inform school districts?

4 And number two, from what I note from the
5 Department's guidance, states would have to request
6 a waiver from the accountability provisions, the
7 school identification requirements and the
8 accountability requirements relating to
9 participation. Are we going to request that waiver?

10 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you, Mr.
11 Chairman. So I'll take those two in reverse order.

12 So you've teed it up perfectly. Yes, USDE,
13 in their guidance yesterday, has flagged that they
14 are inviting waivers in the accountability space,
15 which would include a school level identification as
16 well as participation rate. We had initially
17 submitted a waiver earlier this year that would have
18 addressed parts of that, but it sounds like they're
19 going to be furnishing sort of a new template for
20 states now within the days ahead. And you know,
21 it's very, very likely that we are going to be
22 applying for that waiver authority in all of those
23 areas that you just -- that you just mentioned.

24 In terms of the assessment results, that's
25 a -- that is -- that is one that we've been

1 aggressive about in recent years. So certainly your
2 question resonates with us. If you'll recall, when
3 our administration arrived, one of our first tasks
4 was to get assessment results back to schools before
5 the summer, which had never been done before. And
6 about three years ago, we put a system in place that
7 allowed us to get our PSSA and Keystone results back
8 to schools while school was still in session, so
9 they had the summer to plan. So I really appreciate
10 the question because it's a high priority for us,
11 but we've got some work to do in the days ahead to
12 figure out how we're going to -- I don't think we're
13 going to be able to hit that bar this year,
14 obviously with the flexibility we've built in.

15 So Chairman, we're -- we do promise and
16 commit that we are going to operate with a sense of
17 urgency. And we know the value in turning those
18 results around quickly for our schools.

19 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Quick comment
20 on vaccination. I just encourage your continued
21 dialogue with the Department of Health. I think
22 everybody agrees, you know, the school year is
23 whittling away here. Everybody agrees that
24 in-person needs to be facilitated. And you know,
25 we're seeing -- it's uneven. We're seeing -- I read

1 an article this week, in westmoreland County,
2 they're starting to vaccinate teachers and staff.
3 You know, other counties have done the same, I think
4 Crawford.

5 we need that available across the State.
6 And I know supplies are limited, but if we really
7 want to return folks to the classroom -- and I think
8 all of us do -- we need a push for that vaccination
9 to be -- to be handled. So I'd just encourage you
10 there.

11 Thank you.

12 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you,
13 Chairman.

14 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Excuse me.
15 Thank you, Deputy Stem and Dr. Smith for being with
16 us this morning.

17 And we will move on to the next panel. So
18 thank you.

19 DEPUTY SECRETARY STEM: Thank you.

20 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: The second panel
21 would be Dr. Jay Burkhart, who is the Superintendent
22 of Southwestern School District, representing the
23 Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators.
24 He is the president-elect. Dr. Art Levinowitz
25 Pennsylvania School Board Association president,

1 school director at Upper Dublin School District;
2 Mark Spengler, special education and learning
3 support teacher, East Penn School District,
4 Pennsylvania State Education Association.

5 I believe that I can see that you're all
6 present. I would ask that you could please stand
7 and raise your right hand to be sworn in.

8 (Whereupon, the testifies were sworn en masse.)

9 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

10 And Dr. Burkhart, would you like to begin?

11 DR. BURKHART: Certainly. Thank you.

12 Good morning, Chairmen and Committee
13 members. I want to thank you for the opportunity
14 today to represent PASA, superintendents and
15 assistant superintendents, executive directors and
16 other public leaders from across the State. As you
17 all know, based on the testimony and the questions
18 that have already been stated this morning, it has
19 been a very challenging year for education across
20 the Commonwealth. Our schools have had to build and
21 implement new learning models to meet the needs of
22 our students during a pandemic that we could have
23 never envisioned five years ago, much less even two
24 years ago.

25 The models include fully remote or distance

1 learning, by some terms; hybrid would include a mix
2 of remote and face-to-face learning; and certainly,
3 our face-to-face traditional model. My District,
4 located in York County, like most of the State, is
5 using all three of the models and sometimes
6 simultaneously. We have different levels of
7 students experiencing challenges. We also have
8 different levels of infection and also independence
9 for learning amongst grade levels. And there are
10 times that one of our buildings could be fully
11 remote while others are face-to-face.

12 In order for us to make the transition to
13 these models -- and again, sometimes they're
14 overnight, especially under the new attestation
15 model -- we've had to develop a variety of
16 contingency plans. In my written testimony, you
17 have seen a lot of the challenges that we're facing.
18 Some of the tasks that we have include ways to
19 measure students' lapses in learning that have taken
20 place since March and into the current school year.
21 Districts have had to implement new programs like
22 ours and measure student loss and plan for summer
23 support programs that many of you have questioned.
24 Other school districts are working with their
25 special education population to deliver or to

1 consider COVID compensatory services.

2 Excuse me, I couldn't get that out.

3 we've had budgetary challenges that have
4 flooded our schools, the cost of cleaning supplies,
5 PPE, increased staffing that has resulted from our
6 district facing expenditures for staffing, that you
7 mentioned as a shortage. We currently are on pace
8 to have \$2 million of unbudgeted expenses. We have
9 received some assistance from the federal
10 government. And as mentioned. This pandemic will
11 remain well into next year so the funding is
12 appreciated and certainly helps us meet these needs.

13 We do continue to struggle with staffing.
14 We have limited visitor access, and we are working
15 to make sure that, like our curricular offerings --
16 our extracurricular offerings are still important to
17 our students -- that we maintain those. We will
18 continue to order additional cleaning supplies and
19 PPE. We have worked with staff to train. We have
20 ordered new software to train on that software,
21 including live stream cameras and extra monitors in
22 classrooms so that teachers can keep those who elect
23 to learn from home in front of them on their
24 monitors.

25 We have ongoing monitoring of cases in our

1 district. We have assumed most if not all of the
2 contract tracing in our districts in order to be
3 completed in a timely manner. We have created
4 experts in our administration on prevention
5 guidelines and quarantine suggestions, which as you
6 can imagine, at times has led to undue stress
7 between families and schools. We have rearranged
8 classrooms, cafeterias, recess areas, and other
9 common areas in the school, including our buses,
10 sometimes multiple times in a day. We update our
11 cleaning measures to ensure student and staff
12 safety, and we also have worked on supports for our
13 students and our staff with regard to the concerns
14 for mental health during this pandemic.

15 Our district, like most if not all, is
16 prepared to have staff transition to remote learning
17 with little to short notice and professional
18 development. We have been creative in our school
19 calendar and clumped our in-service days to the
20 beginning of the year in order for staff to train on
21 our new learning management system, as well as
22 familiarize themselves with technology. We are
23 proud of the way our staff has responded over the 12
24 -- past 12 months, and our community as well. We
25 have reimagined education that will be forever

1 changed by this pandemic, and our staff continues to
2 display their adaptability and their effectiveness,
3 because like all of you, we believe every child
4 matters.

5 As I mentioned earlier -- and I believe we
6 agree -- the challenges of this pandemic will be
7 with us for many years to come. So as educators, we
8 will continue to examine our practices and supports
9 for our students. We have always believed in and
10 will prescribe to continuous improvement. There is
11 no easy answer for the challenges, and they are not
12 unique to public education. However, we are aware
13 of the inequities and we must begin to address those
14 inequities at this time.

15 We must work together to properly prepare
16 our teachers, our students, and our families for a
17 public school system that works for everyone. We
18 will better be able to handle it with equity. And
19 we look forward to working with all of you toward
20 that goal. And again, I would like to thank you for
21 the opportunity to testify before you today.

22 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

23 Who would like to go next?

24 Dr. Levinowitz?

25 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Dr. Levinowitz is here.

1 Yep. I'm here.

2 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: You may proceed.

3 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Okay. Can you see me and
4 hear me?

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Yes.

6 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Excellent. Thank you,
7 sir.

8 Okay. I will do my very best to keep my
9 testimony down to three minutes or less. It will be
10 challenging. I urge the Representatives to read my
11 complete eight pages of testimony.

12 Good morning, Chairmen Sonney and Longietti
13 and members of the House Education Committee. Thank
14 you for inviting the Pennsylvania school boards to
15 present testimony on the impact the COVID-19
16 pandemic has had in education. My name is Art
17 Levinowitz, and I'm the PSBA president and have
18 served as a School Director in the Upper Dublin
19 School District for over 20 years.

20 The last time I was in front of this
21 Committee was on June 17th. I presented testimony
22 on school reopenings in the fall of 2020. I come to
23 you with nearly 40 years of experience in various
24 roles of public education. I never for one second
25 thought we would be where we were that day with the

1 closing of all public schools. Unfortunately, I
2 still feel that way about where we are today, doing
3 our very best to reopen all of our districts.

4 In the near future, PSBA intends to release
5 its annual State of Education Report, which this
6 year focuses entirely on the pandemic's impact on
7 public education. Some of those highlights: over 99
8 percent of school districts reported experiencing a
9 positive COVID-19 case among their students and/or
10 staff, making an impact directly on their school
11 community. For roughly two-thirds of school
12 districts for the 20-21 school year, it began with
13 students not attending in-person classes full-time.
14 Since the start of the school year, 85 percent of
15 school districts have been forced to make changes to
16 their instruction model due to the pandemic.

17 Nearly 70 percent of the school district
18 leaders rated inadequate or consistently changing
19 guidelines or guidance from State, federal and/or
20 local agencies as one of their biggest challenges
21 since the start of the pandemic. And that still is
22 continuing. The pandemic has brought on or
23 intensified many other challenges, including special
24 education leads, budget pressure, and staffing
25 constraints. School leaders are also expected to

1 deal with several challenge caused by the pandemic
2 in the future. Primarily among them is how to
3 identify and address the academic impacts of the
4 pandemic caused by the reduction of face-to-face
5 instructional time.

6 A local perspective, I'd like to just talk
7 a little bit about what we're doing in Upper Dublin.
8 In the Upper Dublin School District, we closed our
9 buildings last March, almost a full year ago. We
10 were forced -- we were forced into remote teaching
11 and learning. Largely asynchronous, teachers were
12 providing assignments and assessments for students
13 to complete. While our teachers were providing
14 feedback, the model was not sustainable.

15 Our leadership team worked to build the
16 Cardinal Academy, our virtual program predicated on
17 the use of district curriculum taught by district
18 teachers with realtime synchronous interaction. We
19 further implemented true blended learning, so that
20 students at school and at home had the same
21 experiences.

22 Two points and concerns for us in Upper
23 Dublin: we are concerned more -- we are concerned
24 more than ever about the social and emotional
25 well-being of students and staff. To date, we've

1 received \$144,000 in Federal ESSA funding and are
2 currently waiting for additional \$550,000 in ESSA
3 funds. We have been very careful to allocate
4 stimulus dollars for one-time expenditures only.
5 Those funds are not being used -- those funds are
6 not being used to correct any structural deficit in
7 our annual budget. These funds are being used for
8 technology, supplies, and programs to support online
9 learning.

10 My superintendent often refers to the
11 Lincoln quote, the most reliable way to predict the
12 future is to create it. At Upper Dublin, we are
13 asking the hard questions about where we have been
14 and where we could or should be. Could we return to
15 what was or challenge ourselves to what public
16 education could truly be? Let's take this
17 once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to truly reinvent
18 public education.

19 There's nothing that school leaders and
20 educators would like more than to bring students
21 back into school buildings full-time. However,
22 doing so safely, as we continue to see high levels
23 of COVID-19 transmission in parts of the state,
24 remains a significant concern.

25 One more minute, please.

1 PSBA recently joined with nine other
2 statewide associations to encourage the Governor's
3 administration to work on prioritizing eligibility
4 with the COVID-19 vaccine for administrators,
5 educators, and staff in order to speed up the return
6 of students into classrooms. Unlike, 26 other
7 states, Pennsylvania's vaccination plan does not
8 prioritize these individuals like it should.

9 Prioritizing school staff members for the
10 vaccine would offer a new level of safety and
11 confidence to staff, students, and families and help
12 speed the safe return to in-person instruction. For
13 this reason, we were disheartened to hear the
14 response that the administration does not intend to
15 make further efforts to prioritize vaccine
16 eligibility for all staff members.

17 Two additional recommendations, and then
18 I'm closing, sir.

19 These are two of the same recommendations
20 that we made last year in our testimony, which is a
21 permanent waiver program, similar to one that has
22 been introduced most recently in SB 73 by Senator
23 Wayne Langerholc. And other one is charter school
24 funding reform.

25 So in conclusion, while public education

1 has been fraught with tremendous obstacles, we are
2 confident that with strong continued support from
3 the General Assembly, as well as the Governor and
4 State agencies, we can overcome the uniquely
5 difficult challenges our schools and communities are
6 facing. On behalf of the PSBA, I want to thank you
7 all for attention to and support for our public
8 schools to continue to provide input. I will be
9 happy to take any questions.

10 Thank you, sir, for allowing me the
11 additional time.

12 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

13 Next will be Mark Spengler.

14 MR. SPENGLER: Good morning.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Good morning.

16 MR. SPENGLER: Chairman Sonney, Chairman
17 Longietti, and members of the House Education
18 Committee, thank you for inviting me to participate
19 in today's hearing. My name is Mark Spengler, and
20 I'm a special education and learning support teacher
21 at Emmaus High School in the East Penn School
22 District located in Lehigh County.

23 I'm also a proud member of PSEA and a
24 father of three daughters in the East Penn schools.
25 It is my honor to be with you here today. As I was

1 preparing my remarks, several words continue to
2 circle in my mind: transformation, exhaustion,
3 disengagement, and confirmation. Educators,
4 students, and families have had to transform over
5 this past year. This transformation requires
6 constant flexibility. It also requires constant
7 resilience to manage our frustration and our own
8 grief at what this pandemic has taken from students
9 and our own families.

10 Educators are exhausted. Consistency is
11 like oxygen to educators, and this year has been
12 anything but consistent. To say it hasn't been easy
13 to jump between instructional modes, both in
14 personal and virtual instruction, all while
15 maintaining my regular responsibilities within
16 special education that come up with any school year
17 is the understatement of the decade. While this is
18 not true for every student or every classroom, the
19 reality is that many of our students are disengaged.

20 This whole year has reenforced for me that
21 there is nothing like face-to-face instruction.
22 There's an energy and a level of accountability that
23 comes with sitting with other students and having a
24 teacher in front of you directly engaging the
25 students. Experience of this past year has provided

1 me and my fellow educators with confirmation of four
2 truths that are all addressed in my written
3 comments, but there's one that I want directly to
4 address right now. Our public schools are the
5 economic, social, and educational connective centers
6 for our local communities. My fellow educators and
7 I want nothing more than to return to full-time,
8 in-person learning, but only when it can be done in
9 a way that ensures the health and safety of students
10 and staff.

11 To do that requires the consistent
12 implementation of essential mitigation strategies.
13 We have to be honest and say that some schools are
14 more capable of doing that than others and that
15 could be for many different reasons. Prioritizing
16 vaccinations for school employees is the most
17 important thing the policymakers could do right now
18 to put Pennsylvania on a better path for economic
19 recovery.

20 And while vaccinations can be a game
21 changer for returning to in-person learning,
22 Pennsylvania is not at this time on a clear path for
23 vaccinating teachers and staff who work directly
24 with students. Not in the next month and maybe not
25 even for the next -- the beginning of the next

1 school year. Pennsylvania must establish an
2 intentional strategy that is comprehensive,
3 transparent, and efficient to provide the
4 vaccinations to educators as supply continues to
5 increase.

6 Thank you again for allowing me to be here
7 today as a teacher, as a parent, and as a member of
8 PSEA. We're committed to working in partnership
9 with you. We know we need to get this right and the
10 citizens -- the actions we collectively take today
11 and in the coming weeks matter and will have
12 implications far beyond addressing this immediate
13 crisis of reopening our schools. I will be happy to
14 answer any of your questions.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

16 You know, I find it interesting as I've
17 listened to the testimony and one of the areas that
18 jumped out was, you know, the amount of money that
19 has been expended on preparing our schools for the
20 return of our students. And yet, those students in
21 a lot of those cases still have not returned to
22 those buildings.

23 Can any of you tell me if our teachers are
24 reporting to those buildings every day, whether or
25 not the students are there or not?

1 Are our teachers, you know, some teaching
2 from the school facility and some teaching from
3 home, or are they all reporting to school?

4 DR. BURKHART: Mr. Chairman, I can answer
5 on behalf of southwestern. We currently right now
6 have our elementary students in five days a week and
7 our high school middle school is hybrid, A-B
8 schedule. And tomorrow evening, we plan to present
9 a recommendation to our Board of School Directors
10 for our high school and middle school to return four
11 days a week with an asynchronous Wednesday. But to
12 answer your question, even when we're in hybrid or
13 we have been in hybrid at the high school for some
14 time, and we were fully remote K to 12 due to
15 infections and staffing, at times, our teachers were
16 reporting to the building every day unless they were
17 quarantining.

18 MR. LEVINOWITZ: I will follow up on that,
19 too. That is a similar model that we are doing in
20 Upper Dublin. Currently in Upper Dublin, we have
21 K-5 in five days a week all day. In our middle
22 school and high school, we have a hybrid model.
23 However, we do strongly encourage our teachers to be
24 in the buildings unless there are special
25 accommodations that we have to -- we have to make

1 for them.

2 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: So most of the
3 teaching is, in fact, being administered from the
4 building, would that be a correct statement?

5 DR. BURKHART: Yes.

6 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Except for our cyber
7 academy. Except for our cyber academy that is
8 occurring concurrently. We have teachers who need
9 to stay home, and we've assigned them to do the
10 academy, but that will continue even when we return
11 full-time at all grade levels.

12 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Are you
13 utilizing all of your buildings in some capacity to
14 bring students in or some of your buildings, you
15 know, not seeing any students at all?

16 DR. LEVINOWITZ: We are using all of our
17 buildings. In fact, we're currently bringing in
18 some of our students with the most severe special ed
19 needs four days a week, all day. And we are
20 planning to bring them in five days a week in just a
21 few weeks. And we are looking to expand what we're
22 doing in terms of bringing back as soon as possible
23 all five days a week, full-time as soon as April.
24 We're hoping.

25 Our numbers in Montgomery County have been

1 -- have gone down significantly over the past few
2 weeks. One week does not make a decision. We'd
3 like to see our numbers going down for at least
4 three weeks. I know the Representatives on this
5 call are very familiar with the numbers that are
6 going on in Montgomery County. We still have a high
7 incidence rate, but our positivity rate has gone
8 down to below 6.

9 However, we're still at almost 100
10 incidences. So we are looking at our numbers very
11 carefully and hoping to bring back our students as
12 soon as possible.

13 MR. SPENGLER: In East Penn, we're
14 reporting to work and we're using all of our
15 buildings.

16 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.
17 Representative Ciresi.

18 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you. And
19 thank you all for your testimony.

20 I have a statement and then a question. I
21 agree with you with PSEA 100 percent about the
22 vaccination. Unfortunately, we haven't seen a
23 clear-cut plan to roll out the vaccination across
24 the Commonwealth, and we have so many different
25 things going on, it's ridiculous. And we're hoping

1 that we can handle that. We have a lot of people in
2 1-A who haven't even had a chance to get the
3 vaccination who were in that area that needed. So
4 we're all behind that idea, but we got to get a
5 better plan here at the State to roll this out.

6 Art, you had an interesting thing in your
7 testimony, written testimony. You said as we looked
8 at survey results, we see over 99 percent of schools
9 reporting experiencing positive COVID ID cases. Is
10 it really one percent of the schools that aren't
11 reporting it? And what are they doing that we can
12 do at all of the schools?

13 That's my quick question to you, but I'm
14 going to ask this of both the Superintendent and the
15 PSEA. In the Superintendent's statement, he said we
16 must focus more time on recourse and efforts in
17 professional development. What are we seeing for
18 retirement? Are we seeing much higher retirement
19 rates this year and how do we retain some of these
20 teachers to come back?

21 So those are my two questions.

22 DR. LEVINOWITZ: So thanks for both
23 questions. We are seeing significant retirements
24 and we are -- and I don't think it's only us in
25 Upper Dublin. We are very concerned. We believe

1 that teacher shortages are really real, and the
2 pandemic is making shortages even more pronounced,
3 Joe. Despite our best efforts to build a bench of
4 substitutes, securing database subs has become more
5 challenging than ever before. There's simply not
6 enough subs for the vacancies. Last night we
7 approved an additional five teacher retirements.
8 Most of those came as a shock to me, a long-term art
9 teacher, our long-term art teacher and some other,
10 music teachers who I think we might have decided to
11 retire at this point if we were not in the situation
12 where we are today.

13 So we already had a significant shortage of
14 teachers and substitutes. And not only that, I'm
15 sure you can understand also, we're trying to expand
16 the pool of candidates throughout the Commonwealth.
17 And that is -- has been a challenge and is even more
18 so a challenge.

19 DR. BURKHART: From my perspective in our
20 district, we have not seen an increase or a
21 significant increase outside of the ordinary
22 retirements. However, that being said, even one
23 retirement, we've found that it's been challenging
24 to replace those folks with a qualified replacement.
25 One of the things that our board did that took away

1 from our pool a little bit is that when this all
2 started, we did hire five additional, six additional
3 temporary teachers to fund -- or to start an online
4 academy. And that depleted our substitute pool, but
5 we felt it was necessary to provide that option for
6 our family. So not a significant increase, but even
7 given even the normal retirements, we find
8 challenges and replace them due to the shortage.

9 DR. LEVINOWITZ: And Jim, I'm sure you
10 agree, not all districts can be in that position
11 where they can do the additional hirings. There are
12 some districts just not -- without those resources
13 to hire additional -- because I know some of the
14 districts are able to do that, but you look at some
15 of the significant challenges that other districts
16 are facing in terms of a lack of resources.

17 Just -- and I know -- who is on this call,
18 Representative Nelson is very familiar with what is
19 going on in one of his local districts in
20 Cheltenham, attempted to bring back high school
21 teachers just last week. And within two days,
22 closed with a shortage of teachers reporting to
23 duty. They would prefer taking a leave to having to
24 revert back to not being in person.

25 DR. BURKHART: I would agree. We're

1 fortunate to be in that position that we're able to
2 bring -- we used some of the dollars that we
3 received for one-time expenditures for that. But I
4 would also like to point out that we've had -- we
5 enjoy in our district a tremendous relationship with
6 our teachers association, and they have been very
7 supportive and problem solving with this. So I tip
8 of the hat to those folks, as well, because this
9 does take a village and they've demonstrated their
10 ability to work with us and put the needs of the
11 kids first.

12 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: I would like to
14 announce that Representative Topper has also joined
15 us here in the meeting.

16 And the next question will be by Chairman
17 Longietti.

18 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you,
19 Chairman Sonney. And thank you for your testimony.

20 When I look at the PSBA State of Education
21 Report something that really pops out to me on your
22 top budget pressures, charter school tuition
23 payments. By far identified in that survey, 82
24 percent of respondents, identified that as the top
25 budget pressure, not even close to the second one,

1 which is special ed costs at 34 percent. And you
2 know we have a -- to quantify that, we're looking at
3 almost a half a billion dollars in increased charter
4 school tuition costs.

5 Now, we typically see growth, as you
6 reported, about \$125 million a year, but we're
7 talking about almost \$350 million additional. And
8 we know where that came from because when schools
9 went remote or closed, about 25,000 students
10 migrated to other options, primarily cyber charter
11 schools. So I just want to get a sense for, one,
12 what does that look like at the ground level for
13 school districts?

14 And number two, what's the outlook?
15 Because once those students migrate over, are they
16 going to come back to the traditional school
17 district? And how long of a, you know, a mounting
18 budget issue is this going to be?

19 DR. BURKHART: I can give you exact numbers
20 for our district for this year if you would like.
21 In 2019-'20, we had \$1.3 million in expenditures.
22 In 2020-'21, we have an anticipated cost of \$2.3
23 million in cyber charter schools. So in a \$77
24 million dollar budget, you're looking at about a
25 million dollar increase just this year. We

1 encourage -- you know, obviously we want what works
2 best for our students. We do have our own academy.

3 And typically, what we're finding is that
4 most of the students who have left us do return
5 within the year -- the ones that have left as a
6 result of the COVID pandemic, I can't say the same
7 is true for students who have migrated to cyber
8 starter schools prior to the pandemic.

9 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Representative Longietti,
10 let me answer that question both as a local
11 prospective and as a statewide prospective. So at
12 Upper Dublin School District, students attending
13 charter schools are enrolled only in cyber charter
14 schools. Every student that attends a charter
15 school in Upper Dublin is currently in a cyber
16 charter school. Our district's course for charter
17 schools have been relatively low and good for our
18 neighbors.

19 Each regular education student costs the
20 district \$17,750; and each special education student
21 costs the district \$38,000. We have seen a
22 significant increase in enrollment and costs this
23 year compared to last year. Our expenditures for
24 cyber charter school have increased by approximately
25 \$1 million over the previous fiscal year with what

1 we've received from the feds to date. We believe
2 that our virtual program, virtual program which is
3 taught by Upper Dublin teachers using the district
4 curriculum, is far better for the students than
5 programs that are being offered in our cyber charter
6 schools.

7 I'll answer this comment, too at the State
8 level, that the current charter school funding
9 formula was established, as I'm sure you know, sir,
10 in 1997 under the State's charter school law. And
11 it's not been changed in 24 years since it was first
12 created. Because the tuition rate calculations are
13 based on the school district's expenses, it creates
14 wide disparities in the amount of tuition paid by
15 different districts for the same public school
16 education and results in drastic overpayments to
17 charter schools.

18 PSBA once again urges the legislature to
19 work to help save taxpayer dollars by adopting
20 charter school funding reforms that are predictable,
21 accurate, and reflect the actual costs to educate
22 students in regular and special ed programs and in
23 cyber charter schools.

24 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: I just want
25 to thank you for that insight and point out that,

1 you know, my tenure in the legislature -- it's been
2 almost 10 years now -- that we at one time provided
3 school districts with charter school reimbursement.
4 Now, we didn't by any means reimburse the whole
5 cost, but we at least helped with a portion. You
6 know, we haven't done that now in 10 years. Now, we
7 did put something in the new formula that helps a
8 little bit, but only 11 percent of the money is
9 going to the new formula. So you know, we've
10 largely left districts to shoulder this load on
11 their own.

12 Thank you.

13 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Thank you, sir.

14 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
15 Nelson.

16 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: Thank you. I am
17 sure at this point functional closures have become a
18 much bigger topic of conversation in your districts
19 and with your residents. Have you all been kind of
20 relatively clear with your residents as to how close
21 your buildings have been in kind of reaching that
22 functional closure point?

23 And with us, how close have you gotten --
24 are you two or three staff members away consistently
25 or are you confident in your ability to staff your

1 schools with your current student populations that
2 are in building?

3 DR. BURKHART: What I can say, sir, is we
4 communicate every probable or confirmed case to a
5 building that happens in that day. So at the end of
6 every day, if we have someone in our high school, we
7 put that out. And then we also have a COVID
8 dashboard on our website that families can track.
9 And it shows the 14-day rolling average, number of
10 students in quarantine, number of students or number
11 of staff who are in quarantine.

12 And then, what we also do is we had to
13 close around Thanksgiving due to staff shortages.
14 However, since that time, we've worked aggressively
15 to increase our substitute pool through guest
16 teacher with what's been provided. We've also
17 increased our paraprofessionals. And then what
18 we've also had -- again, another tip of the hat to
19 our association -- they've worked with us to cover
20 classes that are outside the contract of duties.
21 And they've done that, again, to keep the buildings
22 open, keep the kids in school, because as my
23 colleague earlier had stated, the best place for
24 kids to be is in school.

25 And again, I'd like to point out that our

1 teachers demonstrate that on a daily basis. So
2 those are the ways we tackle it. We always put out
3 a message and ask every family member to always,
4 always, always, always have a back-up plan because
5 we could literally close overnight. Sometimes we
6 get four, five, six cases in one evening long after
7 the day ends, and that would force us to close.

8 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Representative Nelson,
9 thanks for your question. And you know the
10 challenges that you've had, you know, that we've had
11 in Cheltenham. We've been very fortunate in Upper
12 Dublin. We've been able to do our K-5 full-time
13 every day without any significant closures. We may
14 have closed odd -- a classroom, but we have not had
15 to close the building. We're looking at our numbers
16 very closely in terms of how many students would
17 like to attend full-time.

18 The concern is our middle school is very
19 small. We're very concerned about keeping spacing
20 and air -- and ventilation in our middle school.
21 That would depend on how many students return. Same
22 thing with the high school, you know we have a newer
23 high school, but it really depends on how many
24 students come back. But again, at the same time, we
25 will be offering the cyber option, the Academy, even

1 when we bring back our students full-time.

2 It does require working very, very, very
3 closely with your leader -- with your union
4 leadership on these issues. And again, just to
5 emphasize, vaccinations would greatly help all of
6 our districts in the Commonwealth to have our
7 teachers feeling much more comfortable. And not
8 only our teachers, you know, we say teachers by
9 mistake. We're talking about every staff person in
10 our building, you know, coming back.

11 And so there is a statistic, Representative
12 Nelson, you're probably aware about it. We're able
13 to bring back our elementary school students, but
14 there's a release that there's a three-times greater
15 chance for older students to catch COVID than our
16 younger students. So that's another issue that
17 we're faced with.

18 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: And if I could
19 close, it's a little bit more of a request for you
20 all as you all are building your virtual learning
21 platforms. Please continue to investigate your
22 school's discipline practices, particularly as it
23 pertains to policies regarding out-of-school
24 suspensions, perhaps, infusing more of an approach
25 to virtual learning as a better way to ensure that

1 students who are wrestling with, you know, issues
2 that perhaps may cause them discipline infractions
3 are still able to be connected to the schools and be
4 connected to the learning. So thank you very much
5 for your time.

6 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

7 Just for the information, I know that the
8 third panel is teed up and we have two more
9 questioners on the current panel. So next will be
10 Representative Schroeder.

11 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: Thank you,
12 Chairman. Thank you all for being here today. I
13 guess first as a comment I was going to say to Dr.
14 Burkhart, I'm in constant conversations with my
15 superintendent locally and the school board members
16 there. And I know this year, you know, jumping
17 through constant new hoops and new guidances and
18 goal posts that you're supposed to reach has made it
19 really difficult to make plans, and spending a lot
20 of time and resources on that instead of what you're
21 trying to do, which is educating our children. So I
22 thank you for sharing your testimony.

23 I guess my question is for Dr. Levinowitz.
24 Hopefully -- is that okay?

25 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Levinowitz.

1 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: Thank you.

2 So in your testimony, specifically say now
3 more than ever the social and emotional well-being
4 of student and staff is critical. And I know
5 personally -- and I'm sure many members here have
6 heard from parents that are really scared about
7 their children, the social and emotional things that
8 they're dealing with at home, but also if they were
9 struggling before the pandemic with anything, that
10 it's really almost at a crisis level for them at
11 home.

12 And I guess my question to you is what
13 could we do as a legislature to help with that? And
14 if you have any examples or things you have done in
15 your district to try to address that, because we
16 know even, you know, in our area, suicide rates of
17 our students have even gone up. It's horrifying.
18 It's scary, and we need to address it.

19 So what do you suggest?

20 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Yes, well, it is -- we are
21 extremely concerned with social emotional, the
22 well-being of not only our students --

23 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: And our staff.

24 DR. LEVINOWITZ: -- but our staff. And
25 let's not forget our school board members, our 4500

1 school board members, and our legislators and every
2 -- and our parents and our communities. I think,
3 you know, an easy answer is money. But you know,
4 how to use that money -- we're trying to increase
5 the number of social workers in addition to our
6 guidance counselors. They're trying to be proactive
7 in recognizing students that are experiencing
8 significant issues in that area.

9 Again, and this is not going to go away so
10 I know when we come back in the fall -- and boy, I
11 hope we don't have to spend too much time on our
12 testing in the fall. You know, if we have our
13 students coming back for the very first time. I
14 urge to look very carefully in terms of just the
15 amount of testing that will be required. That could
16 also affect the social emotional health of all our
17 students.

18 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: I -- yeah.

19 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Resources, resources, and
20 more resources.

21 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: No, I agree with
22 the testing. That's a whole other topic, and maybe
23 we can talk about that another time.

24 But I guess are parents reaching out to
25 you, too, and telling you, you know, things that are

1 going on? And the local community support, you
2 know, are we making sure, like, students are being
3 addressed that have these, you know, mental health
4 needs?

5 Like, are you worried about that? What are
6 you seeing on the ground?

7 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Can you ask that question
8 again, please?

9 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: Sure. So like
10 parents, you know, I know a lot of them are
11 concerned, you know, the normal going to school,
12 interacting with people. Sharing sometimes doesn't
13 always happen with the parents at home.

14 How are we making sure students aren't,
15 like, falling through the cracks that they need help
16 and that we're being their advocate?

17 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Well, it's working --
18 it's encouraging as many parents as possible. We
19 notice it the soonest and also teachers, if students
20 are doing online, if we see students are not signing
21 in, the attendance, if they're missing from the
22 roll. And I'm not -- about reaching out and asking
23 for support. Just incredibly a serious issue, I
24 think, that we all need to face in the Commonwealth
25 as we return. And currently, it just scares me

1 about suicide.

2 You know, we see news, we see the news
3 about parents who lost a child to suicide. And it
4 just turns my heart. And fortunately, we have not
5 experienced that, you know, in Upper Dublin, but it
6 is extremely scary. And I think we need to work
7 together with PDE, with PASA, with the teachers,
8 with PSCA to come up with as many strategies as
9 possible to address the very serious concern.

10 REPRESENTATIVE SCHROEDER: Well, thank you
11 very much for taking that serious. And maybe as we
12 go further here, we can work together to develop
13 more things for students and staff and families.

14 Thank you, Chairman.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
16 Topper.

17 REPRESENTATIVE TOPPER: Thank you. And
18 good morning, gentlemen. Thank you.

19 I apologize to the Chairman for popping in
20 here, in and out. We're in Appropriations hearings.
21 And yes, everybody does believe that more money
22 seems to be -- seems to be the answer in every
23 department, which is understandable. I will say
24 that for any school district that says that their
25 cyber program is better than the ones being offered

1 by cyber charter school, I think that the ultimate
2 judge of that will not be the school districts, it
3 will be the parents. And I think I'm very
4 comfortable letting them make that decision.

5 But in the meantime, I'm -- one of the
6 concerns that I'm looking at -- and maybe
7 Mr. Spengler, this would be best directed to you,
8 teacher, the boots on the ground specifically in
9 special education.

10 Are the remediation efforts that will be
11 needed, and probably over this year, what do you see
12 as possibly a structure that could be used in terms
13 of -- I'll say summer school; I don't necessarily
14 mean every kid coming back every day throughout the
15 summer -- but what are some of the things from a
16 pedagogical perspective that we could look at for
17 this summer as trying to catch students up?

18 MR. SPENGLER: Thank you, Representative
19 Topper. I appreciate the question.

20 So we're going to need to deal with the
21 reality that many students are going to -- they're
22 going to be behind. They're going to regress.
23 They're not going to be progressing in their IEP
24 goals and their grades in a way that they normally
25 would.

1 So we have some things in play that I think
2 we can build upon, like extended school year
3 services. You know, I think it makes sense to look
4 at expanding the amount of students who attend
5 extended school year services and making it easier
6 for them to access those services. That makes
7 sense. I think school districts probably could use
8 some help with resources. If there is an influx of
9 numbers flowing into the extended school year
10 services, it may require additional staff,
11 additional resources to help that along.

12 And you know. In our school district,
13 we're doing something right now, we're offering
14 regression services that really go all the way back
15 to last March when this whole pandemic hit and we
16 went into virtual. And students are being given
17 what I will call a tutoring opportunity after
18 school. And I think that's an excellent --

19 REPRESENTATIVE TOPPER: And who would be
20 identifying the regression? Would it be the parents
21 who are going to say, look, I can see that my child,
22 my student is not where they need to be, or is that
23 going to be the educators or will that be a
24 combination of both? An educator saying, look,
25 these are the students that we think need it,

1 parents saying, we think my, you know, student needs
2 it; how do you see that happening or how does it
3 work in your district?

4 MR. SPENGLER: Excellent question. So with
5 the regression services that we're looking at right
6 now, we took some data points going back last
7 spring, and as students entered the school year.
8 And we made a determination on who regressed. And
9 when they did, we offered those services to the
10 parents. The IEP teams were involved and then we
11 kind of -- we kind of moved it from there. So that
12 was the structure that we used.

13 REPRESENTATIVE TOPPER: Thank you. Thank
14 you, Mr. Chairman.

15 I know our time is short. I appreciate the
16 opportunity.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: And we do have
18 one more, which would be Representative Kail.

19 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: Thank you very much,
20 Mr. Chairman. I'm sure I will be short here.

21 And thank you to the testifiers. I
22 recognize your function as extraordinarily critical.
23 I am of the belief that education is life essential.
24 I asked a series of questions about six or seven
25 months ago when we had a joint hearing. It was

1 actually in the Senate Chamber with the Secretary at
2 the time. And I would like to ask the same type of
3 questions to you.

4 You know, we've heard here today what you
5 all need to reopen successfully. I guess my
6 question is at what point are we going to get where
7 the risk that we are doing or the damage that we're
8 doing to our children by not being in person and by
9 not having that is going to outweigh the risk of
10 being exposed to COVID, which is a very serious risk
11 of being in-person face to face. I mean, I'm
12 concerned when I hear, well, if we had a vaccine,
13 that would really help the process.

14 I get that. Absolutely. But what happens
15 if the vaccine is ineffective. You know, nine
16 months ago, the concern was we don't have PPE.
17 That's why we can't reopen. Well, you have PPE now,
18 I hope. And still we're not reopening a lot of our
19 school districts. This is real. And what
20 Representative Schroeder was saying is real. We're
21 seeing it in western Pennsylvania. And I know you
22 guys are seeing it, too. I know you take it
23 seriously. I'm not saying you don't.

24 But kids' lives are quite literally being
25 destroyed in some cases. And I know we're doing it

1 so that we could help the health and welfare of
2 everybody. So I get that there's a give and take
3 here, but at what point does them not being in
4 school outweigh the risk it would be to go back to
5 school?

6 DR. BURKHART: I'd be happy to answer that
7 to start with, Representative. I think we're there.
8 When I say that, I'm going to speak strictly from
9 Southwestern's point of view. So one of the things
10 that we've done is we've taken a look at how do we
11 mitigate the risk, so that it does even reduce it
12 further. For example, in our district, we're
13 fortunate enough that our HVAC systems are mostly
14 newer. We have a process where we renovate
15 buildings every 20 years. So even now our oldest
16 HVAC is 20 years, but we use folks and we go around
17 the rooms and we check the carbon dioxide level.

18 we check that because it indicates the
19 amount of fresh air. So what we do is we turn the
20 air over faster. And if it gets over a certain
21 amount, we turn that HVAC system on stronger because
22 we're trying to reduce that risk. That's why we
23 believe we've been successful in keeping our
24 buildings open. We have now encouraged and
25 purchased PPE, as you mentioned earlier, for our

1 staff to double-mask because that, again, reduces
2 the amount of virus in the air and helps filter it
3 out to their exposure risk.

4 We are very, very strict on our contact
5 tracing. We have an administrator who was trained
6 through Johns Hopkins. So we contact trace,
7 quarantine effectively and as quickly as possible.
8 We also -- we reduced our bus load. We sanitize our
9 bus -- our bus after every run. We've expanded our
10 cafeteria lunch wave, so we decreased the distance.
11 We increased the distance in the cafeterias and back
12 and forth. So that, again, maximize the distance
13 between when their masks are off.

14 Like my colleagues, we've done things where
15 we don't put all the kids in the hall at the same
16 time. So we continue to refine those skills. And
17 that's why we agree with you, kids learn best -- I
18 think every educator will tell you kids learn best
19 in school. And those are the things that we've now
20 mitigated, that I personally believe we're there.
21 We are getting the kids in school. We will follow
22 the guidelines.

23 When we see an elevated risk, we'll react
24 accordingly. But that would be more of a temporary
25 transition to remote learning than the more

1 permanent transition we saw last spring. So
2 hopefully that provides a little insight on what
3 we're doing. But to answer your original question,
4 I believe we have to get the kids in school as much
5 as possible. I think we're demonstrating a way to
6 do that and do it safely and effectively.

7 DR. LEVINOWITZ: I do agree that we need to
8 get the students back as quickly -- as soon as
9 possible. I can only -- I think each district is
10 going to be different in terms of where they are.
11 You know, urban cities, districts and cities are
12 going to have a more challenging time. I know in
13 Upper Dublin, we hear about this at every school
14 board meeting, you know, that we need to bring our
15 students back full-time and we are really getting
16 close to where that risk reward is really there.
17 which is why it is most critical to get the youngest
18 students in full-time. K-5, again, in our district,
19 they are there every day and things have worked out.

20 we have other challenges in our secondary
21 level buildings. We hope to work on those over the
22 next month. And as you indicated earlier, we really
23 hope to bring back our -- all of our students if
24 they decide to come back -- as soon as April. And I
25 do understand what you're saying, Representative

1 Kail, that it is a very, very difficult challenge
2 that we're all facing, and just realize that school
3 board directors, many of them have students in the
4 district. So they see it firsthand. And we
5 understand, and we are really doing our very best to
6 bring students back.

7 MR. SPENGLER: Thank you for that question,
8 Representative Kail.

9 I look so forward to increasing in-person
10 instruction. It's so important for my own children
11 here at home, as well as the students that I teach,
12 the special education students that I'm working
13 with. We miss it very much. We're in a hybrid
14 situation. We'd love to have more in-person.

15 I think the risk/reward, if we could lower
16 the risks, I think it makes it easier for everybody,
17 again, with the vaccines, with anything that we can
18 do for air circulation. You know, what do we say to
19 a school district where the average kindergarten
20 size is 30 children? You can't maintain that
21 six-foot social distance. Do those schools just
22 ignore that?

23 And so moving those risk factors down, I
24 think, can facilitate that conversation. And any
25 way that can be done is just really appreciated.

1 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: Yeah, I would agree
2 that we obviously need to move the risk factors
3 down. I just -- and I have seven kids myself and
4 four of them are school age. So we're living this
5 every day, as well. And I just am of the opinion
6 that we got to get these kids back to school. It's
7 been detrimental to their educational development.
8 There's a gap. There is a real gap.

9 I just have concern if we're not going to
10 go ahead forward. Thank you all very much. I
11 appreciate it.

12 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

14 And you know, before I dismiss this group,
15 you know, I just have one final question. And I
16 don't know if you're going to be able to answer it
17 or not, but do you figure that a high percentage of
18 your administration and staffing will absolutely
19 take the vaccine when it's made available?

20 You know, we don't anticipate that any
21 school is going to probably direct that all of their
22 employees be vaccinated, so do you anticipate a high
23 number being vaccinated?

24 MR. SPENGLER: Absolutely, Chairman Sonney.
25 I think it's going to be very high based on what I'm

1 hearing from my colleagues.

2 DR. LEVINOWITZ: We in Upper Dublin,
3 Chairman Sonney, we believe it's going to be very
4 high, too.

5 DR. BURKHART: Same at Southwest. We
6 believe it will be high.

7 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you. And
8 thank you all for being here this morning.

9 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Thank you for the
10 opportunity.

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: We will move on
12 to the third panel.

13 So on the third panel, we have Dr. John
14 George, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania
15 Association of Intermediate Units; Lenny McAllister,
16 the CEO of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public
17 Charter Schools; and Dr. Kirk Williard, Pennsylvania
18 Association of Career and Technical Administrators
19 President and Director of Career and Technical
20 Education at Chester County IU.

21 Gentlemen, if you could all please stand
22 and raise your right hand.

23 (Whereupon, testifiers were sworn en masse.)

24 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

25 Dr. John George, you may begin.

1 DR. GEORGE: Thank you, Chairman Sonney.
2 I'm going to defer my opening comments to Dr. Jill
3 Hackman, Executive Director of the Berks County
4 Intermediate Unit.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Okay. Very
6 well.

7 DR. HACKMAN: Good morning, Chairman Sonney
8 and members of the House Education Committee. As
9 shared, my name is Dr. Jill Hackman, and I'm the
10 executive director at the Berks County Intermediate
11 Unit. And Dr. George who just shared his comments
12 from PIU, our executive director and I thank you for
13 this opportunity to appear in front of you today.

14 while the COVID pandemic has created many
15 complexities and challenges for schools and families
16 across the Commonwealth. I have leaned into the
17 situation and embraced the idea of seeking solutions
18 to support schools and students within our IU
19 regions. Since March 13, 2020, IUs have continued
20 to provide both in-person and virtual instruction.
21 In addition, IUs became adept at providing virtual
22 hearing and vision services, providing teletherapy
23 for physical therapy, occupational therapy,
24 psychological services and counseling.

25 with COVID-19, we've seen a spike in mental

1 health needs, and you've heard others today comment
2 on that, as well, as a concern. IUs are responding
3 by administering virtual mental health support and
4 other programs and services. As we look forward to
5 the coming months ahead, we need to analyze the
6 content that we once used to learn to bridge any
7 potential bridging gaps. To address potential
8 learning gaps, IUs, in partnership with IDE will
9 provide professional learning on an integrated
10 system of support focused on accelerated learning,
11 which was described earlier today by Deputy
12 Secretary Matt Stem and Dr. Sherri Smith.

13 Therefore, it's recommended that continued
14 support is provided to schools across the
15 Commonwealth to address individual student needs
16 both academically, social and emotionally and
17 support our educators across Pennsylvania. So at
18 this time, I will turn things over to Dr. George to
19 highlight statewide efforts that IUs currently en
20 engage in.

21 Dr. George.

22 DR. GEORGE: Thank you.

23 Dr. Hackman referenced a number of ways in
24 which IUs deliver instruction at the school district
25 level. The ambition to these efforts, intermediate

1 units have engaged in many statewide efforts to
2 create flexible learning environments. We recognize
3 that in-person instruction is preferable, and we all
4 hope that students can return to school in the fall.
5 However, we also realize there is a time and place
6 for virtual instruction. In fact, intermediate
7 units have been providing virtual instruction for 20
8 years and have been providing educational technology
9 and professional development for long before then.

10 COVID, however, has necessitated that all
11 schools be able to deliver effective virtual
12 instruction today. There are still a large number
13 of students, however, that cannot benefit from
14 virtual instruction because they do not have access
15 to wifi. Census data indicates 21 percent of
16 Pennsylvania households do not have access to
17 broadband. It's important to recognize those
18 students with limited connectivity are not only
19 confined to rural areas, but live in all regions of
20 the Commonwealth.

21 Limited connectivity also includes
22 households that are unable to afford internet access
23 and the devices needed to navigate the internet.
24 Access to broadband or lack of it is a significant
25 equity issue facing Pennsylvania students. And

1 because of COVID, it is critical that we mitigate
2 the technology access inequity. As Deputy Secretary
3 Matt Stem testified earlier, intermediate units,
4 with the support of the Department of Education,
5 launched initiatives to develop methods to deliver
6 instruction to students that lack access to
7 broadband. Examples include working with the PBS
8 station to deliver instruction over television,
9 deploying mini computers, known as raspberry pies,
10 that host content on devices that we can deliver to
11 remote areas, and developing grab-and-go packets for
12 families that have instructional materials at home.

13 while all these practices are promising and
14 have served as a stopgap measure, their
15 effectiveness is more limited than instruction that
16 could be provided with broadband. Therefore, we
17 strongly urge the legislature to invest in
18 technological infrastructure and make broadband more
19 accessible to communities where it does not exist
20 and to make it and the devices needed to navigate
21 the internet more affordable for those families who
22 have limited economic means. Please know that
23 intermediate units do have the infrastructure and
24 the experience in forming public-private
25 partnerships to support public, charter, and private

1 schools to create a more flexible system of
2 education in Pennsylvania.

3 And thank you allowing us this opportunity
4 to testify to you here today.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

6 Mr. McAllister, you may testify next.

7 MR. MCALLISTER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Good morning, Chairman Sonney, Chairman
9 Longietti, and honorable members of the House
10 Education Committee.

11 My name is Lenny McAllister with the
12 Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools.
13 Along with Neil Mcnitzie [PHONETIC], Mrs. Jane Swan
14 and Dr. Stacy Gill-Phillips, I thank you for the
15 opportunity to testify. I also thank Spectrum, an
16 institution serving students with cognitive
17 challenges, including those on the autism spectrum
18 for allowing me to testify from their campus today.

19 During unprecedented times, a few actions
20 can help our communities overcome crises. One is to
21 think outside the box to adjust to challenges in
22 realtime. Another is to take appropriate risks,
23 leveraging science, best practices, and shared goals
24 to move communities from a state of fear to a state
25 of empowerment. That's been the norm at public

1 charter school since March.

2 cyber-charter schools initially enrolled
3 additional students without compensation. They
4 offered expertise to district schools as we
5 combatted a common invisible enemy. Brick and
6 mortar charter schools pivoted from cyber learning
7 into hybrid and in-person instruction once they
8 trusted the science and technology to support those
9 decisions. They reacted to student needs and
10 listened to parental concerns to provide academic
11 stability for our most vulnerable Pennsylvanians.

12 On this public record, I thank them for
13 their efforts. Over 2020, differences emerged
14 between the flexible charter community and rigid
15 models of education that are older than the -- of
16 colored television. We learned a stark lesson,
17 innovation in education matters, and so does a focus
18 chiefly centered on school children within public
19 education, not systems. Diversity of academic
20 instruction is more important now than ever before.
21 Economic hardships, criminal justice woes, racial
22 discriminations, and healthcare disparities that
23 ravage us have a time-tested remedy, a quality
24 education that best fits us uniquely.

25 The most disadvantaged suffered

1 disproportionately in 2020. They also
2 overwhelmingly make up our Pennsylvania charter
3 school community. Those students have enjoyed the
4 support that their teachers and administrators
5 provide daily in a continuity of instruction since
6 March. Families get it now, as we all do. We must
7 use this prime moment to make smart, fair, and
8 empowering changes within public education law.

9 Innovation, flexibility and responsiveness
10 matter. Equality, economic viability, and personal
11 development all depend on it. We must learn the
12 lessons of COVID-19, starting with listening to
13 Pennsylvania families. They want us to cast aside
14 the tone of toxic competition within public
15 education, including some of the back and forth
16 we've heard today. They know that the best economic
17 fits for all kids today makes for a better
18 Pennsylvania tomorrow.

19 So with that, I'd like to thank this
20 Committee once again for the chance to represent
21 over 169,000 public charter school students this
22 morning, as well as the thousands of educators and
23 families supporting those students. Our team looks
24 forward to your questions and, of course, our
25 ongoing partnership together.

1 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.
2 Dr. Kirk Williard.

3 DR. WILLIARD: Yes. Thank you,
4 Mr. Chairman. And thank you to the House Committee
5 for allowing us the opportunity here to provide
6 information.

7 You have a difficult job to really hear and
8 understand and discern the directions and things
9 that will be changed as we look at Pennsylvania's
10 educational system. On behalf of PACTA, the
11 Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical
12 Administrators, I am the president that represents
13 the career and technical centers across the
14 Commonwealth. I'm also director for the Chester
15 County Technical College here in Chester County.

16 And I can tell you that it's been a very
17 proud moment to see how all of the career and
18 technical centers in the Commonwealth have adjusted
19 and made changes, as you've heard from many of the
20 technologies and utilized technology in a manner
21 that helped to support not only the virtual and
22 synchronous and asynchronous learning, but also the
23 hands-on environments that the career and technical
24 centers really rely on.

25 Students that choose career and technical

1 administration clearly look for the opportunity to
2 touch the equipment, build and design, and all of
3 the career and technical centers around the
4 Commonwealth have worked very hard to utilize the,
5 particularly, the Governor's GEER Funds as well as
6 the competitive and supplemental equipment grants to
7 support the technology as well as the equipment
8 needs to make sure that the students are getting the
9 learning that they deserve.

10 And not only is it the learning that the
11 career and technical centers were focused on. When
12 you think about the impact on the learning and then
13 the preparation for their careers and their futures,
14 they were really emphasizing the need to make
15 adjustments as COVID has impacted both the learning
16 as well as the workforce of tomorrow. And when we
17 look at what's happening with the workforce of
18 tomorrow, we clearly wanted to make sure, with
19 career and technical education, that we were
20 responding to the learning as well as the workforce
21 preparation.

22 And I know all of you received a copy of my
23 written testimony. And you can see the four beliefs
24 that PACTA as an organization subscribes to. And we
25 really utilize it though to strengthen the

1 leadership across the Commonwealth, making sure that
2 all the leaders had the resources and/or were making
3 connections with their districts and with the
4 intermediate units. Our intermediate unit partners
5 across the Commonwealth have been helpful, not only
6 in materials and resources, but also in the arena of
7 professional development. You know, the technical
8 educators really needed some support in making sure
9 that the technology that they were utilizing for the
10 synchronous and asynchronous learning environments
11 really were impactful, not only just from the pure
12 learning and getting the information, but also the
13 ability to provide hands-on experiences for the
14 students.

15 And I can tell you there's been a great
16 deal of creativity in the Commonwealth in that arena
17 for providing an arena for students to get some
18 hands-on experiences, whether it was sending
19 something home and/or, as you've heard from many of
20 the colleagues here, a district approach in a hybrid
21 model or a hybrid collection approach allowed some
22 of the students to get to their career and technical
23 centers. So we really looked at that becoming a
24 little bit of a collaborative ecosystem of learning,
25 where we were engaging both the career and technical

1 center, our school districts, our business and
2 industry as well as our post-secondary institutions
3 to look at how we were pulling all of those pieces
4 together.

5 And I can tell you it's been a very
6 difficult time, as you've heard from everybody,
7 making sure that the students' needs are being met.
8 And you've heard previously about the technology
9 access and the access to the internet. That was an
10 area that every career and technology center had to
11 work with around the Commonwealth, to make sure that
12 their students had the technology in their family
13 environments, but also had access to the internet so
14 they could connect with their teachers. And that
15 was both an asynchronous and synchronous
16 environment.

17 When you think about the hands-on piece of
18 career and technical education, I can tell you that
19 across the Commonwealth, each CTC worked diligently
20 to work with their districts and determine when
21 those times were for their students to be in the
22 buildings. And the teachers were definitely
23 interested in that. We heard emphatically across
24 the Commonwealth that the CTC teachers wanted to try
25 to get those hands-on experiences available for

1 their students, obviously with all of the health and
2 safety protocols, and of course PPE made a
3 difference in that environment, as well.

4 But I can tell you as we meet twice a month
5 with the directors/leaders around the state in
6 career and technical education, the combination of
7 the support with their districts, their local
8 boards, their JOCs, and working with the
9 intermediate units has clearly made a difference for
10 the career and technical centers to be able to
11 continue to deliver the quality of education and the
12 quality of preparation for the workforce of
13 tomorrow. And that's a key piece when you look at
14 some of the beliefs in the written testimony that I
15 provided for you, the concept of making sure that
16 career and technical education is viewed as
17 obviously a learning environment, but also a career
18 developer for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

19 And I'll end there with my comments, but I
20 thank the Committee for having us here this
21 afternoon and I look forward to answering any of
22 your questions.

23 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

24 I'll start the first question, and it
25 really goes to the IUs. How much of an uptick have

1 you seen in the demand, you know, for the request
2 for services from the IUs? And has that demand been
3 coming from all aspects of our public education
4 system, whether it be cyber charters,
5 brick-and-mortar charters, and our public schools?

6 DR. GEORGE: Perhaps I will start from a
7 State perspective and Dr. Hackman can go from the
8 local perspective. The uptick has been in various
9 parts of intermediates. For example, for our online
10 learning programs, we've seen significant increases.
11 On the other hand, the living professional
12 development, we've seen decreases. Obviously it's
13 difficult to deliver professional development in a
14 virtual setting. So on the other -- we still
15 continue to provide our base services, which is
16 special education. And we do that both directly as
17 well as virtually.

18 Dr. Hackman, do you wish to expand on that?

19 DR. HACKMAN: Thank you, Dr. George.

20 Services within the school districts that
21 we're offering is really focused in around the
22 curriculum, instruction, and assessment area, making
23 sure that schools are supported, both public and
24 non-public, that they're supported with the
25 resources and the tools to be successful, working

1 whether it's in a total remote hybrid or foreign
2 person model, the bad -- we've seen an increase or
3 an uptick in services from the curriculum,
4 instruction, assessment standpoint and providing
5 that technical support and coordination for our
6 school districts.

7 A lot of that work is driven through the
8 Pennsylvania Department of Education and their
9 Roadmap for Success. And that Roadmap continues to
10 evolve based on how the pandemic has been evolving.
11 But again, I would say our online services have
12 increased as well as our supports and resources for
13 the -- instructional assessment.

14 Thank you.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Under normal
16 circumstances, how much of that support, you know,
17 absolutely needs to be in person? That makes it
18 extremely difficult to do today.

19 DR. HACKMAN: I'd say it's been an
20 interesting transition over the past 11 months-plus
21 now. We've been able to make that shift, whether it
22 is virtual or in person. And I think we've all
23 become much more skilled at the virtual connection
24 communication, and that's either with teachers,
25 staff members, students, family members. So that

1 has been something that has been shifted. The first
2 two months, I would say, were more challenging, but
3 over the last 10 months, we've gotten much more
4 skills at connecting and providing that support in
5 any type of environment that is based on, you know,
6 the local conditions of health and safety.

7 DR. GEORGE: I would just add one of the
8 things that has become more difficult is delivering
9 special education and related services to children
10 with disabilities. Really, that's difficult to do
11 for children who have learning challenges. So
12 face-to-face instruction, clearly, is the preferred
13 methodology for teaching children with disabilities.

14 DR. HACKMAN: And Chairman, if I may just
15 add one last thing, a focus that we've always been
16 having as a priority, as I use in schools across the
17 Commonwealth, is in the area of mental health or
18 social emotional needs. But we've really seen a
19 shift there for requests for supports and services
20 in this space. And so that whether it's virtual
21 counseling services, telehealth counselling, we've
22 also took our comprehensive school assessment model
23 and put that on the virtual training platform and
24 then we've leveraged the safe to say something
25 Program. That is a statewide program to make sure

1 that we're resourcing -- sharing that resource
2 across the Commonwealth. So the idea of social
3 emotional well-being has been a top priority through
4 this pandemic.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

6 Representative Isaacson.

7 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Thank you. And I
8 know we're getting low on time.

9 My question is for Mr. McAllister. You
10 know, I'm on the Education Committee and we went
11 through this whole past year making sure that there
12 was proper funding for public education. We flat
13 funded and made sure that it was the one budgetary
14 item that got funded first before anything else in
15 the general budget. And we certainly have pushed
16 out the COVID GEER money out to all aspects of
17 public education, whether it was public school
18 districts or charter schools.

19 So my question is geared towards, I see,
20 that some charter schools received about \$53
21 million-plus from the paycheck protection loan
22 program. I was wondering what was that money for
23 really? I'm trying to understand why they were
24 applying and receiving paycheck protection loans
25 when we funded education and we made sure that

1 employees were retained in the charter schools and
2 there wasn't an interruption of revenue. So if you
3 could just speak to that, I'd appreciate it.

4 MR. MCALLISTER: Thank you for the
5 question, Madam Representative. And I will make
6 sure that I also give the CEOs that are joining me
7 an opportunity to answer that, but if you look at
8 the two different sectors of the charter community,
9 look at the cyber charter schools, brick-and-mortar
10 charter schools. They cyber charter schools had an
11 uptick, as we all know, in enrollment because
12 parents found that they wanted to move their kids
13 over to public cyber charter schools that were more
14 experienced with it and had more success with that
15 level of teaching.

16 As a result of that, those schools had to
17 also not only sustain themselves as they were in
18 February of 2020, but they also had to ramp up
19 exponentially in order to take on this huge spike.
20 As a result, some of them -- and I would defer as
21 well to Miss Jane.

22 Swan on this -- they saw a need to make
23 sure that not only the funding was stabilized, but
24 also to deal with PPE. There were some instances
25 with special education where they had to do

1 face-to-face. They had to do even some in-person
2 home visits in order to make sure that the IEPs and
3 other type of special education needs were being met
4 in the cyber community as well as ramping up and
5 making sure that the teacher to student ratios did
6 not go out of flux as a result of this spike in
7 enrollment.

8 When you go over to the brick-and-mortar
9 charter school, you have to understand that those
10 schools, as well, had to make sure that they put
11 special provisions in place to make sure that they
12 were able to maintain themselves. As you well know,
13 charter schools, generally speaking, get 5 percent
14 less. And if you're looking at some of the schools
15 that have already been disadvantaged or
16 disadvantaged community, they were hit the hardest
17 by COVID.

18 As a result, some of these schools had to
19 make sure they were able to sustain themselves, so
20 that the continuity of education that they have
21 providing since March stays in place. Many of those
22 schools have pivoted into in-person or hybrid
23 instruction a little earlier than the local school
24 districts have. So they have been trying to be
25 ahead of the curve. And some of those CEOs, based

1 on the unique challenges they had on the ground,
2 chose to take advantage of the PPE loans.

3 Mrs. Swan, if you can talk a little bit
4 about what you had to face when you were dealing
5 with some of those situations at Reach and some of
6 the decisions you may have made, that would be
7 fantastic. Give a little bit more insight to them,
8 Madam Representative.

9 MS. SWAN: Absolutely. Thank you, Lenny.
10 And thank you, Madam Representative.

11 I just wanted to let you know that there
12 were only several of the schools that were actually
13 taking advantage of the PPP moneys that you
14 referenced, and those were for very specific
15 concerns. You know, they may have lost some of
16 their employees. They may have instructed more of
17 the students, which is always number one. But we
18 specifically did not take advantage of that.

19 We continued to push forward and provide
20 actually more summer learning than we had ever done.
21 We had over 1500 students participate at Reach this
22 past summer, and then I would anticipate even more
23 with some of the compensatory services that we'll
24 also be providing to all students who require that.
25 Individual learning differences, but I hope that

1 that answers your question for that particular one.

2 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: And I appreciate
3 that, and I appreciate you not taking advantage of
4 those loans. And I believe that, you know, the
5 Gears funding for COVID impact was the money that
6 was supposed to go towards both public traditional
7 education systems, as well as the charters, whether
8 it was cyber or a brick-and-mortar charter to deal
9 with the aspects and the impacts of the pandemic.
10 And the Paycheck Protection Program was small
11 business loans and it was for employee retention.
12 And I don't obviously think that was the best choice
13 on behalf of the charter schools to be going after
14 loans that were not meant for them.

15 Thank you very much.

16 MR. MCALLISTER: If I may also, Madam
17 Representative, I also understand that there was a
18 little bit of a funding situation with the uptick
19 that we initially had with the cyber charter schools
20 from March to June. That put some of those schools
21 in a powerful situation. And as a result of that,
22 they may have made some of those decisions.

23 As Mrs. Swan said, not every cyber charter
24 school or every charter school in general made that
25 choice. But as we well know, those first couple of

1 months were tenuous because we had schools that were
2 shut down and parents looking for options. And some
3 of those schools had to make a choice. Either they
4 were going to take those kids on at cost and eat the
5 cost, eat roughly \$5 million of that, or those kids
6 were going to be without an education option. So I
7 can understand why they may have taken advantage of
8 the PPE loans, but I can see some of your concern,
9 as well. But thank you very much for the question.

10 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
11 Ciresi.

12 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you,
13 Mr. Chairman.

14 And thank you to the panel. I also want to
15 thank the comment about looking at every child that
16 we educate across the Commonwealth. So that's very
17 important to us with the millions of kids -- the
18 million kids that we have in public education.

19 I have two questions. One is for
20 Dr. George. Good to see you, by the way.

21 Can you address the reason why the IUS
22 didn't get any of the federal funding from the CARES
23 Act at the last -- I think it was the last time it
24 came out -- and how that affected you?

25 And the second is, back to what

1 Representative Isaacson just brought up with the
2 charter schools. I'm a little confused by why you
3 would take that money considering that the public
4 schools are paying you per pupil, both for special
5 ed and regular ed. And will you be refunding that
6 money back to the public schools for the additional
7 costs that they have incurred over this last year?

8 DR. GEORGE: Okay. So Representative
9 Ciresi, I'll take the first part of the question.
10 And thank you. Good to see you, as well. I do miss
11 my time in Montgomery County.

12 So the question is COVID relief. Yes,
13 there's two bills because it was \$2.2 billion that
14 the federal government had sent to the Department of
15 Education or the State to disburse to school
16 districts. The Department of Education -- I assume
17 in conversation with the legislature, but I don't
18 know -- but the decision was made to flow 100
19 percent of that money through the Title 1-A formula.

20 The federal government required 90 percent
21 through title 1-A and the State had a 10-percent
22 discretion. In Pennsylvania, all 100 went through
23 title 1-A. Intermediate units do not receive title
24 1-A dollars. Therefore, intermediate units received
25 no COVID relief dollars on the ESEA 2 funding piece.

1 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you.

2 MR. MCALLISTER: Thank you for the
3 question, Mr. Representative. Good to see you once
4 again. In regards to the two questions -- and let
5 me make sure I have those questions properly. One,
6 you kind of reiterated the question from the Madam
7 Representative earlier in regards to why taking that
8 money. And you know, we all well understand that we
9 went through some unprecedented times since the
10 spring. As a matter of fact, we have seen over \$2.2
11 billion, roughly, flow into Pennsylvania for public
12 education since the spring. And even in the midst
13 of that, we're still finding that the two biggest
14 school districts in our Commonwealth, in
15 Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, are 100-percent shut
16 down to any type of in-person, whether it's hybrid
17 or totally in person.

18 So we're finding that. And as we've heard
19 in this hearing, we're continuously hearing we need
20 more money, we need more resources. And that's
21 nothing different for another sector of public
22 education. Because again, as we all well know,
23 charter schools are public schools, as well, within
24 the public education system in Pennsylvania. So
25 we're finding that schools are still looking at the

1 unique needs that they have on the ground to make
2 sure that their families feel comfortable enough to
3 enjoy the academic instruction that they need. And
4 so we're -- we have found that those charter schools
5 have made decisions, just like the school districts
6 have, but we're finding that we're having a lot
7 greater success getting them at least into a cyber
8 model or finding success with cyber learning until
9 they are able to get into hybrid and in-person
10 instruction.

11 In regards to the refunding of the PPP
12 loans, that's going to be up to each individual CEO
13 in regards to what they're doing and what their
14 relationship is with the federal government. I
15 can't say that. Even as we continue to go through
16 this pandemic, we're finding school districts such
17 as the Philadelphia School District that's in line
18 for another half a billion dollars. And they have
19 yet to fully open their doors to the school -- the
20 kids that they have across their school district.

21 So I know that maybe this is not the time
22 to question where the money is coming from because
23 the money seems to be flowing everywhere. The
24 number one thing -- and I thought that was the focus
25 of this hearing -- which was what are we doing for

1 kids and how are we moving forward? And I think
2 this is part of the frustration that we're hearing
3 from our families within the coalition, is the face
4 that even whether their kids are struggling, whether
5 it's mental health or emotional health or academic
6 regression, we continue to focus on the funding. So
7 I dare ask respectfully that we all continue to
8 focus on that. Let's work together.

9 This is the toxic competition that I've
10 been talking about in both my written testimony and
11 my oral testimony. This is the moment we can move
12 away from that. I'm sure we can figure about the
13 dollars moving forward, but we have to make sure we
14 figure it out for the kids first.

15 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: I appreciate your
16 response. And I can't speak on behalf of the
17 Philadelphia School System, which I know is battling
18 their different issues to get these kids back, but I
19 can speak on behalf of the four districts that I
20 represent, three of which are all in school. One
21 isn't, but it didn't get back to the point -- and we
22 don't need to debate this any further -- it didn't
23 get back to the point of the money that was taken by
24 the charters and cybers, which the regular education
25 system still has to pay per pupil.

1 So you went above and beyond. And my
2 districts that are in session right now are paying
3 it all. So we can debate that at a later time, but
4 I just wanted to get your take on it.

5 Thank you.

6 MR. MCALLISTER: Thank you, sir.

7 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
8 Longietti.

9 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you,
10 Chairman Sonney.

11 Dr. George, I want to thank you and the
12 intermediate units for assisting school districts in
13 pushing out remote learning. Many -- some of whom,
14 you know, were not fully capable for that prior to
15 the pandemic. And you identified some of the --
16 some of the needs or concerns. We know that
17 broadband is a big issue and the availability of
18 broadband as well as hardware and software
19 technology.

20 But I wanted to reference something from
21 the Association of School District Business
22 Officials in their report. They had a significant
23 concern with school districts with online learning
24 supports, being able to build those, scale those,
25 and enhance those. And I just wanted to get your

1 take on some of the other challenges, and in
2 particular, this one. What can IUs do to help
3 school districts build out those online learning
4 supports or other challenges that they face with
5 remote learning?

6 DR. GEORGE: Well, there are several
7 components in the effective online program that
8 would be operated by school districts. And you
9 mentioned obviously, you have -- broadband being a
10 prerequisite, having the technology/equipment being
11 a prerequisite. But there's also, behind those, on
12 the wide area network, there has to be protections
13 in place, firewalls, security measures, a lot of
14 that infrastructure that protects children from bad
15 people out there who want to do things.

16 And a lot of folks don't realize that, but
17 the IUs provide a lot of those protections and fire
18 walls for the wide area networks that do exist.
19 Then you have to have teachers who are proficient in
20 the delivery of virtual instruction. So
21 professional development is very critical here. One
22 of the challenges is technology changes so fast. By
23 the time teachers get to one area, it has changed on
24 them. So it's ongoing professional development. We
25 just can't think of this as a dog and pony show type

1 of delivery. It's continued -- almost a coaching
2 model that's required for teachers to keep up with
3 the changing technology, the changing software, and
4 the changing infrastructure.

5 So those are just a few of the items. The
6 IUs do all of these things, but it requires, you
7 know, districts have to purchase these services as
8 I, you know, mentioned -- I didn't mention in my
9 response to Representative Ciresi, we don't --
10 we're not a taxing authority, nor do we have direct
11 revenue from the State. So we're an entrepreneurial
12 entity that has to sell services and districts have
13 to be willing to purchase those services for us to
14 be able to give those supports.

15 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Well, thank
16 you again for all your efforts. And I'm sure that
17 school districts appreciate the partnership that
18 they have with the intermediate units.

19 DR. GEORGE: Thank you.

20 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you,
21 Representative Longietti.

22 Representative Gillen.

23 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you very
24 much, Mr. Chairman.

25 I know we're running over time, so I'm just

1 going to make a comment and not ask a question. The
2 next event on the schedule is lunch, so I will be
3 extremely brief. I want to thank my friends at the
4 intermediate unit. Dr. George, I think the first
5 professional meeting with an educator that I had
6 when I was first elected to office was with you,
7 right across the street there. We had a cup of
8 coffee together.

9 Dr. Hackman, you fill those shoes
10 admirably. Thank you for the interaction, the
11 dialogue, the discussion, the debate. You've helped
12 facilitate with legislators in our own area and I'll
13 look forward to our 8:00 a.m. Thursday virtual
14 interaction.

15 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you,
17 Representative Gillen.

18 Representative Gleim.

19 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Hi. Thank you all
20 for being here today. I just have a quick question
21 for Dr. George. Are there any public schools that
22 the IUs supported 100 percent of their online
23 learning?

24 DR. GEORGE: I'll have to think about that
25 for a moment. I'm not -- I would not say 100

1 percent. That's probably a difficult threshold to
2 meet, and I would have to check with my counterparts
3 across the 29 IUs to know that definitively. My
4 anecdotal information is probably not at 100
5 percent.

6 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Okay. And then, I
7 was just wondering do you publish or put out how --
8 what the cost is to those public schools for your
9 services?

10 DR. GEORGE: Yes. Every intermediate unit
11 has a different funding structure, and I am
12 confident that every intermediate unit has those
13 rates established and produces them for school
14 districts.

15 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Okay. Thank you.

16 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
17 Staats.

18 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: Thank you,
19 Mr. Chairman.

20 And again, thank you to our panel for your
21 time today. We certainly appreciate it. I'm going
22 to direct my question to Dr. Williard, as I suspect
23 career and technical education issues might be,
24 perhaps, a little unique. So my first question is
25 what impacts are you observing on college and career

1 readiness upon graduation?

2 And then, my second question would be what
3 should policymakers consider to best support CTE
4 educators as they grapple with the difficulties in
5 transitioning from hands-on learning to a remote
6 environment?

7 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Thank you, Representative
8 for those questions. I can take the first one.

9 when you think about the college and career
10 readiness piece, the difficulty, as really all
11 public school entities are grappling with, is the
12 virtual environment and how you build those
13 experiences for a career readiness portfolio. You
14 know, career and technical education, you know, its
15 capstone is getting students out in that co-op work
16 environment. So trying to find ways that we can do
17 that in this virtual environment is a struggle, but
18 it is happening across the state, there are
19 businesses and industries that are willing to
20 collaborate with the CTCs and create those virtual
21 environments, whether it's through, you know, mock
22 interviews or virtual tours of facilities and things
23 of that nature.

24 And I know a lot of career and technology
25 centers are also working with their post-secondary

1 partners. That's a piece of that readiness, is
2 getting students some of the academic options, as
3 they go on to a post secondary environment, as well.
4 But I do believe that as we continue to look towards
5 what policy measures could be addressed, you know,
6 looking for ways to, you know, earlier I talked
7 about the collaborative nature of this, how do we
8 engage businesses to, you know, either adopt,
9 whether it's a career and technology center or their
10 local school districts, how can they work with those
11 entities to make sure that they're doing some work
12 to provide those learning experiences for that
13 career readiness aspect?

14 And I think anything that we can do to
15 incentivize businesses and industries to work with
16 their local school districts to provide those
17 experiences, I think, would be money well spent if
18 that's part of the incentive process, but even if
19 it's just an in kind-kind of environment, where they
20 see the changing workforce and would clearly
21 understand that as we build our CTC Programs.

22 we have to look at what the change in the
23 work force is going to be as a result of COVID
24 because there are changes and I don't think they're
25 all fully identified. But how can we collaborate

1 with those businesses and industries to make sure
2 that our students understand what that new work
3 world looks like for them as they head into it? I
4 hope that answers your question, Representative.

5 REPRESENTATIVE STAATS: It does. I
6 appreciate your answers. Thank you very much.

7 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you. And
9 thank you to the panel. We very much appreciate you
10 being able to spend this time with us. We are going
11 to break and we will be back at 1:30 to resume the
12 hearing.

13 Thank you.

14 DR. LEVINOWITZ: Thank you very much.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

16 I will call to order this hearing of the
17 House Education Committee. This will be a
18 continuation that we started this morning, a hearing
19 of the effects of COVID on our public school system.

20 This afternoon -- excuse me -- we are
21 joined currently by Jason Budd, Deputy Secretary for
22 Government Relations, Acting President of Bishop
23 McDevitt High School. Maria Kreiter -- excuse me --
24 Executive Director at the Fairwood Academy Alliance
25 of Approved Private Schools, and Gary Niels,

1 Executive Director, PA Association of Independent
2 Schools.

3 So Jason Budd, if you would like to --
4 well, I guess first we do need to swear you in, so
5 if you would all please rise and raise your right
6 hand.

7 (Whereupon, testifiers were sworn en masse)

8 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

9 Okay. Jason, if you want to begin, you can
10 proceed.

11 MR. BUDD: Okay. I presume everybody can
12 hear me?

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Yes.

14 MR. BUDD: Thank you.

15 Good afternoon, Chairman Sonney and members
16 of the House Education Committee. My name is Jason
17 Budd, and I am in my 26th year of continuous service
18 to the schools of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.
19 Currently, I serve a dual role with the Archdiocese
20 as I am Deputy Secretary for Government Relations,
21 and I am also the acting President of Bishop
22 McDevitt High School in Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

23 I'm grateful for the opportunity to appear
24 before you today to discuss what we in the
25 Archdiocese of Philadelphia have experienced in the

1 last 11 months relative to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2 In March of 2020, like many schools and school
3 systems throughout the country, we quickly learned
4 the threat and paradigm shift that COVID-19
5 presented to us as educators. Our schools responded
6 quickly and remarkably well in moving to set up
7 flexible instruction within 48 hours of schools
8 closing to in-person instruction. This happened
9 based on a symbiotic relationship between teachers
10 and students, parents and administrations, and
11 teachers union and senior leadership.

12 And while at times it was not easy, the
13 students and their future remained our mission. We
14 are also positioned to accomplish this pivot because
15 many years ago in a winter much like the one we are
16 experiencing now, we had too many days out of school
17 due to snow. We endeavored to never allow an
18 external force to disrupt the flow and continuity of
19 education in our schools again. We worked with the
20 Pennsylvania Department of Education for years to
21 establish weather-related allowances for versions of
22 online education delivery when weather threatened to
23 close a campus. This mindset and the years of
24 preparation placed us in a solid position to adapt
25 to the changing landscape that is and was COVID-19.

1 while we were able to complete instruction
2 for the year, we were not able to provide most of
3 the social opportunities and rites of passage that
4 typically adorn and crown the ending of a school
5 year in our system. Students lost athletic
6 practices, games, and recruiting opportunities.
7 They lost proms, award ceremonies, and in-person
8 graduation exercises. They lost those moments that
9 bring many generations together to celebrate
10 achievement and the willing advancement into new
11 challenges.

12 As the President of Bishop McDevitt,
13 telling our parents, many of them graduates of our
14 school as well, that they would not be able to watch
15 their child walk to the stage to receive a diploma
16 was heartbreaking. While these moments may seem
17 insignificant given the loss of human life during
18 this very serious and trying time, these moments are
19 important, and the loss of them has negative
20 effects, as well.

21 Our schools experienced financial losses
22 due to the absence of donation revenue, given the
23 economic uncertainty of the virus and the loss of
24 event-driven fundraising exercises. In an effort to
25 alleviate the burden parents were also experiencing,

1 we prorated fees for sports and other activities.
2 As we moved towards the end of the budget year,
3 schools worked to curtail expenses as best as they
4 could. And as a result, we were able to maintain
5 all of our staff, resulting in no layoffs. Our
6 focus continued to concentrate efforts and funding
7 on the student and staff experience during the
8 pandemic, and thus we determined to cancel summer
9 improvement projects, so as to stay that course.

10 while we initially experienced great
11 difficulty in the collection of tuition,
12 organizations such as BLOCS, a scholarship
13 organization, Business Leaders Organized for
14 Catholic Schools, helped with emergency grants, and
15 we extended payment timelines for parents. As we
16 turned our sights to the new school year of
17 2020-2021, we developed comprehensive reopening
18 plans based on the Center for Disease Control and
19 the Commonwealth's guidelines.

20 Each school was tasked with establishing a
21 Coronavirus Committee and a health & safety plan, to
22 be reviewed for content, strategy, and operational
23 feasibility. These plans have held up tremendously
24 well throughout the year. Key components of those
25 plans included six feet social distancing, required

1 use of masks, additional cleaning with newly
2 purchased electrostatic sprayers, modified
3 schedules, and flexibility with parents who desired
4 an all-virtual instruction experience for their
5 child, if they wished.

6 Additionally, in an effort to be ready for
7 whatever may come in the new year, we invested \$1.4
8 million in the new interactive camera systems for
9 our classrooms. These cameras, approximately \$3,000
10 per classroom, allowed our teachers to connect in
11 realtime with students learning from home. They
12 also fostered interaction and dialogue between
13 teachers and students in the classroom, as well as
14 students at home during a hybrid session. I should
15 note that our schools, aside from one or two -- once
16 or twice this year -- we have been in hybrid the
17 entire time, offering in-person instruction since
18 September.

19 Our teachers are the unsung hero of this
20 pandemic. They have adopted so many new skillsets
21 over the last 11 months. The efforts they put into
22 learning the intricacies of these cameras, the
23 potential blind spots of a hybrid classroom, and
24 dealing with the emotional fallout caused by this
25 crisis have been unheralded. They have spent their

1 own money and time to make themselves the best at
2 what they do, despite the ever-evolving challenges
3 of this historical time.

4 In the opening statement of his
5 February 1st Wall Street Journal article, Catholic
6 Schools are Beating COVID, William McGurn echoes the
7 spirit of these sentiments by saying: "Amid all the
8 pain and disruption, a year of coronavirus has given
9 Americans a new respect for those working to keep
10 daily life as normal as possible, from the frontline
11 nurse to the Amazon delivery man. Near the top of
12 this honor roll is an especially unsung hero: the
13 Catholic school teacher."

14 Despite all of these efforts though,
15 enrollment suffered somewhat due to the pandemic.
16 In many cases it was experienced in younger grades,
17 PreK and Kindergarten, where parents just chose to
18 keep their children home instead of enrolling them.
19 However, we did exhibit a six-percent decrease in
20 enrollment and school closures, which I will not
21 specifically say are tied to the pandemic, but can't
22 not be tied to the pandemic at the same time, if you
23 understand what I'm saying. I'm just not willing to
24 go into the data here. It's just an unfortunate
25 circumstance.

1 There was considerable cost associated with
2 preparing schools for these new modalities. The
3 availability of PPP funding with its great
4 flexibility helped us enormously with these
5 expenses. However, we received very little help
6 from other governmental programs. Unfortunately,
7 only the School District of Philadelphia shared any
8 of the funding it received with any of our schools.
9 We are so grateful for our partnership and
10 student-first relationship with the School District
11 of Philadelphia.

12 Sadly, no state aid was provided to
13 increase nursing services during this historic
14 health crisis. There are not enough nursing
15 services provided in a non-pandemic environment.
16 During this pandemic, the limited nursing staff
17 available was entirely overwhelmed. We feel
18 strongly that this pandemic serves as a warning to
19 all of us that a strong social and academic school
20 environment begins with a healthy school
21 environment. And to say that a nurse in a building
22 one day per week is enough to ensure that healthy
23 environment is not sufficient, rather it is indeed
24 negligent.

25 Since the Archdiocese was one of the only

1 school systems opening campuses in southeastern
2 Pennsylvania, we experienced transportation issues
3 with our cooperating school districts in the
4 Counties of Montgomery, Bucks, Delaware, and
5 Chester. Many of the school districts within these
6 counties attempted to not provide transportation to
7 citizens of the Commonwealth attending our schools,
8 since their schools were not opening their physical
9 campuses. While it took some wrangling and speedy
10 work by the Pennsylvania legislators to remedy this
11 mistreatment, many of our students unnecessarily
12 lost valuable in-class instruction.

13 At times, we struggled with conflicting
14 information emanating from the Pennsylvania
15 Department of Education and local county health
16 departments regarding COVID levels and what would
17 trigger a shutdown of a building or campus. The
18 Commonwealth's instructional models based on low,
19 moderate, and substantial levels of COVID, did not
20 hold up and were largely ignored by school
21 districts. We identified a surge at Halloween, but
22 not at Thanksgiving or Christmas. We attribute this
23 to calendar modifications we made in our schools,
24 extending all virtual instruction periods prior and
25 after each of these holidays.

1 Further, our data consistently showed, and
2 continues to show, that nearly all our cases came
3 from outside of school and not within the school
4 building. While COVID has made us stronger in many
5 ways related to customer service, adaptation,
6 technology, and innovation, the financial effects
7 and delayed capital improvements have set us back in
8 other ways. It will likely take us many years to
9 recover from the issues created by the pandemic.

10 Again, I thank you for the opportunity to
11 speak with you today. I hope that you are able to
12 glean from my words that we love our students,
13 parents, teachers, and school communities. As a
14 mission-driven system, we always try to place the
15 students first. Please help us as we continue to
16 positively affect the education of young people in
17 Pennsylvania. Remember us and what we do when
18 arguing the tenets of legislation such as Back on
19 Track.

20 Please remember that in order to combat a
21 health crisis we need health practitioners,
22 primarily nurses serving our school communities.
23 Thank you and I will pray for you as you attempt to
24 face this challenge and advocate for all of the
25 students within the Commonwealth.

1 Thank you.

2 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Excuse me.

3 Thank you. I -- we have a technical difficulty.
4 We're going to have to pause momentarily while we
5 try and take care of that issue. The streaming is
6 not working for the public to be able to view at
7 this time, and so we are trying to get that fixed.
8 And hopefully we will have that fixed very
9 momentarily.

10 Okay. Apparently our difficulties are
11 taken care of. Anybody that is on virtually, they
12 might have to exit out and reenter the site in order
13 to be able to reconnect again, but they should be
14 able to do that and it should work.

15 So we can move on to the next testifier.
16 Would that be Maria?

17 DR. KREITER: Yes. Hello. Thank you.

18 Good afternoon, Chairmen Sonney, Longietti
19 and members of the House Education Committee. Thank
20 you for inviting the Alliance of Approved Private
21 Schools to speak today. My name is Dr. Maria
22 Kreiter, President of the Alliance of Approved
23 Private Schools and Executive Director of Fairwold
24 Academy at PHMC, an approved private school located
25 in Montgomery County, just outside of Philadelphia.

1 our schools were created by an act of
2 legislation in the early 1960s that formed a
3 distinguishing educational partnership among the
4 state, public school districts, and families. We
5 serve the most challenged and challenging students
6 in the Commonwealth, including those with severe
7 exceptionalities, maladaptive behaviors, severe
8 emotional and social deficits, historic school
9 failure, and comorbid mental health conditions.

10 Fairwold Academy is one of 31 approved
11 private schools across the Commonwealth that
12 collectively educate over 4,200 special education
13 students between the ages of 2 and 21. While we
14 share the same pandemic-related educational
15 challenges as our colleagues in public education,
16 for this hearing, we have identified the challenges
17 that uniquely face our member schools, students, and
18 families to be heard.

19 I invite you to refer to the info graphic
20 provided by our member schools. Regarding
21 disability-related complexities exacerbated by COVID
22 restrictions, APS schools have tried to maintain
23 in-person total, scaffolded, and instructional
24 blended models. While nearly half of the schools
25 have moved to total in-person school days by

1 February, several variables continue to plague the
2 schools, including frequent COVID closures and
3 contact tracing, causing increased parental choice
4 to remain home and participate virtually.
5 Inconsistency in a special education student's
6 routine has a devastating effect on scholastic
7 growth and mental health of some students and their
8 families, including increased isolation, individual
9 hospitalization from trauma and depression.

10 Despite the amazing strategies our teachers
11 use to engage students, those with cognitive
12 impairments require adult supervision to prompt for
13 motivation, eliminate distractions, encourage self
14 regulation, and facilitate a structured home
15 environment. Many of our students lack adult
16 supervision or a quiet space free of distraction.
17 And many simply do not have the skills necessary to
18 adjust to a virtual platform.

19 Even though 93 percent of our member
20 schools provide live instruction for nearly all of
21 the school day, these barriers significantly
22 contribute to successfully achieving academic,
23 behavioral, and social progress. The limited access
24 to grants and resources due to APS schools being
25 ineligible for COVID-19 relief grants has been a

1 barrier for APS schools to provide Internet access,
2 hot spots or learning devices to students and
3 families.

4 Like all schools, the plethora of resources
5 needed to meet the requirements of health and safety
6 plans have intensified budget frugality as our
7 schools have not been eligible for COVID relief
8 grants. Only about half of APS schools were able to
9 provide learning devices or Internet access to
10 students and families. Without Internet or a
11 device, live virtual instruction is barely possible
12 and students miss related behavioral health and
13 other support services of which they are entitled.

14 Most of our member schools reported that
15 while IEP meetings and efforts are fully in play,
16 some aspects of special education compliance have
17 been challenging. Specifically, implementing
18 specially designed instruction virtually, monitoring
19 progress, data collection, and life skills
20 instruction depend on students' ability to attend
21 school consistently. Our schools are concerned with
22 accurately recording academic or skill regression.

23 Despite our best efforts training parents
24 and caregivers, these obstacles remain. Probably
25 the most frustrating challenge we face is the lack

1 of guidance for navigating CCS's responsibilities.
2 APS schools serve hundreds and hundreds of school
3 districts and charters. Each LEA provides different
4 expectations for developing a CRS plan and there is
5 little direction given to APS schools on how to
6 calculate, report, plan, inform, collect, and fund
7 CCS education. With these issues, we have found
8 engagement strategies, as you see at the bottom of
9 our infographic, and small successes in our daily
10 work environments.

11 Our work is challenging in the best of
12 times, and our schools remain committed to providing
13 the special education reports and services our
14 students and families deserve.

15 Thank you for your time and the invitation
16 to meet with you this afternoon.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

18 And now, Gary Niles.

19 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: He needs to unmute
20 his mike.

21 MR. NIELS: Good afternoon, Chairman Sonney
22 and members of the House Education Committee. I
23 represent 110 independent schools enrolling 40,000
24 students from Erie to Chester and Stroudsburg to
25 Pittsburgh. Our schools are Jewish, Catholic,

1 Quaker, Episcopalian, non-sectarian, boarding, day,
2 single sex, coed, large -- as in 2,000-plus students
3 -- and small -- as in 45 students. Our schools are
4 proud of their socioeconomic and racial diversity.

5 Yesterday I submitted to you a list
6 compiled by school heads of about 40 ways that
7 children have been impacted by the pandemic at
8 school, at home, and in their social lives. I hope
9 you have a chance to review it, as we sought to
10 answer the question, how has the pandemic impacted
11 our students?

12 But this afternoon, rather than read
13 through this list, I'd like to briefly shed light on
14 two different types of circumstances that played out
15 in some of our schools as a result of the pandemic.
16 First, independent schools exist in the marketplace.
17 They must demonstrate their worth and value as
18 tuition-driven entities. To exist, they must
19 attract tuition-paying families.

20 Under normal circumstances, this place is a
21 healthy pressure on schools to perform. However,
22 under the conditions of a pandemic, this healthy
23 pressure becomes a tempest laden with stress and
24 conflict as people's health and lives are
25 potentially at stake. Due to circumstances of their

1 own lives, and often because of the experience in
2 the spring, most tuition-paying parents were
3 demanding that the schools open to provide in-person
4 instruction. School administrators, who answered to
5 a board, understand that their parents are expecting
6 them to open, but obviously in a safe environment.

7 On the other hand, teachers who cannot
8 fathom how a return to in-person instruction could
9 possibly be safe for them and their families were
10 obstinate in their demand that the school open
11 solely offering remote instruction. The stage is
12 set for the conflicting agendas between the
13 expectations, hopes, and demands of the parents and
14 the teachers. This would swirl around the students,
15 many of whom were cognizant of the conflicts as
16 rumors would circulate as to which teachers were and
17 were not returning to school, which teachers would
18 return for in-person instruction, and who would only
19 return if they would qualify for remote-only
20 classrooms, how the school would find qualified
21 substitutes to replace the resigning teachers, and
22 of course how schools could minimize risk to
23 children and teachers heading into circumstances
24 that no one had ever encountered.

25 It was against this precarious and

1 uncertain backdrop that schools prepared to open in
2 August and September. Of course, they made it
3 through those precious intentions.

4 I appreciated the testimony of Jason Budd.
5 His story is very similar to ours. Looking back
6 now, we're amazed at how our schools have operated
7 safely, mostly in a hybrid model.

8 The second scenario I would like to share
9 has to do with the schools within the PIS membership
10 that offer education to students from low-income
11 families. In addition to either low cost or no cost
12 education, these schools also provide a secure safe
13 haven for young people who are often in unstable or
14 unsafe home environments. To do this, they not only
15 offer classes, but they also offer two or three
16 meals a day.

17 Yesterday, I received this message from the
18 head of one of these schools. First, she wrote:
19 many of our students have lost immediate family
20 members. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles who were
21 taking care of them have passed way. We are doing
22 our best to try to support those grieving students
23 and families in every way that we possibly can:
24 grief counseling, groceries, internet access,
25 whatever.

1 Secondly, while our overall attendance is
2 fairly high, the students who miss in-person or
3 virtual school days are generally missing in action.
4 A number of students are receiving attendance
5 interventions because they are gone so much. Many
6 are students who had excellent attendance when they
7 were attending full in-person learning.

8 Several of our seniors have had to acquire
9 part-time, or in some cases, full-time jobs as a
10 result of not being physically at school full-time.
11 Family members or familial circumstances have
12 required them to find jobs outside of school. Most
13 of these are working too many hours. This has
14 negatively impacted their attendance, their academic
15 performance, and their prospects for their future.

16 I know that in addition to these schools.
17 I know that in addition, these schools are working
18 hard to try to stay in touch with these families and
19 in doing everything they can to remain to keep
20 students engaged and contacted. These are just a
21 couple of small scenarios within the greater
22 challenges that face our schools and our students.

23 Thank you for having us.

24 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

25 we'll let Representative Isaacson with the

1 first question.

2 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Thank you,
3 Mr. Chairman.

4 This is directed towards Jason Budd. Hi.
5 How you doing?

6 In your testimony -- oh, and by the way, I
7 appreciate you reminding us all of everything we've
8 been through this past year as my son goes to Roman
9 and my daughter was at Hallahan, so well aware of
10 it. But could you do me a favor and please expand
11 for the Committee on what the school district of
12 Philadelphia has shared with you this year?

13 You mentioned that they were one of the
14 sources of assistance that you got with educating
15 the students within your district.

16 MR. BUDD: So yeah, I would have to get
17 back to this Committee on specifics, except to say
18 it came through the natural channels and the
19 interpretation of legislation that would, you know
20 -- that would have been within the realm of their
21 ability to share. As I mentioned at the start of
22 this, I have been doing a dual role for the
23 Archdiocese and working at Bishop McDevitt. That is
24 a point to echo because, as you said, you have
25 family at Hallahan. Bishop McDevitt is slated to

1 close at the end of this year.

2 so I would have to confer with my
3 colleagues and get more specifics about what exactly
4 that revenue stream was, so as to properly respond
5 to this Committee if that's okay.

6 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Yeah, I
7 appreciate it. I'm sure it had a lot to do with
8 Title 1 and other sources.

9 MR. BUDD: That's exactly what I was
10 thinking, but I just didn't want to misspeak.

11 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Okay. Thank you
12 very much.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
14 Ciresi.

15 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you,
16 Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the three of you. I
17 also want to say to Jason, the comment you made
18 about transportation issues, I agreed with you 100
19 percent. I was a school board member for years, and
20 I felt it was unfair the busing issues you had and
21 all the rest of the Catholic schools and the private
22 schools was in question that we needed to continue
23 to do that from the perspective of this is what our
24 public needs.

25 I just had a quick question for all of you.

1 One is, in the Catholic schools, are you at all
2 virtual with any of the students? And is it being
3 offered to them if they want it to be?

4 The Academy, the question I have for the
5 alliance-approved schools, and I understand -- how
6 come you didn't get any of the grants? And did the
7 public schools help with any of those conditional
8 costs? Because I know I visited a lot of those
9 schools, and I know that they work hard with the
10 public schools.

11 And as far as your private schools, did you
12 lose a lot of students back to public school because
13 of being closed for that time?

14 So thank you.

15 MR. BUDD: First, to answer Representative
16 Isaacson's question, it was CARES Act money. I
17 apologize for not having that at the ready.
18 Secondly, Mr. Representative, thank you for your
19 advocacy with regards to transportation. We're very
20 grateful that it worked out. And yes, we have
21 offered all virtual opportunities to our students,
22 particularly in the high school settings, as well.
23 So for example, the school I'm currently
24 residing at, Bishop McDevitt, I would say about a
25 third of our students have opted for all virtual.

1 They might have older generations living within the
2 home, compromised immune systems of other members of
3 the family, and so they've opted for that. And I
4 would say a third of our students are in the
5 building one day, a third are in the building the
6 next day. And as I said, a third remain at home
7 with an all-virtual option.

8 MR. NIELS: Yes, we have an in-person
9 option, hybrid, or all virtual for most of our
10 schools.

11 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: And did you lose
12 any students back to public school or no?

13 MR. NIELS: I actually was surprised. Just
14 like Jason reported, we've had some losses in the
15 elementary school level. But on the hole, I've been
16 surprised by how our enrollment has stayed stable.
17 In fact, some of the regions where public schools
18 announced that they were staying virtual, all
19 virtue, we gained a lot of families in those
20 situations.

21 MS. KREITER: Hello. So I'd like to
22 respond to the question about the Alliance of
23 Approved Private Schools. Simply put, the APS
24 schools were not invited and were ineligible to
25 apply for CARES grant funds. We had worked with

1 many of our friends in the legislature to help us
2 with, perhaps, the next round of grants to be
3 eligible. And I can say that for some of the
4 approved private schools, it really depended on the
5 home LEA. Some of the LEAs would provide Internet
6 or devices for students. That was really -- from
7 the whole membership, that was the focus applied by
8 the public schools.

9 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
10 Nelson.

11 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: Thank you,
12 Mr. Chairman.

13 Thank you all for joining us, and
14 particularly Principal Budd. I appreciate seeing
15 you. I'm sorry we haven't yet gotten to sit down
16 face-to-face as you are wonderfully in our district,
17 but certainly, our district here in the 154th has
18 unfortunately lost a couple charter schools to
19 closure. One, again, Bishop McDevitt. We've also
20 lost Immaculate in Jenkintown.

21 So I have kind of two questions. One is
22 for each of you. As your enrollment fluctuates up
23 or down, what have you found to be kind of the
24 primary cause or stressors on your budgets from a
25 staffing or an equipment perspective as students

1 come or as they leave?

2 And then, there have been some bills that
3 have been introduced in prior sessions, oftentimes I
4 think actually through former Representative
5 Donatucci regarding kind of understandings of
6 practices and procedures that you all would follow
7 when closing a school.

8 Have you guys considered what that language
9 looks like? You know, my fingers are crossed that
10 we're done with that for now. But unfortunately, I
11 know, especially within the Archdiocese, that with
12 COVID, school closures have come to be something
13 that we need to make sure we're prepared for. So
14 one, just the cost fluctuations with students; and
15 two, preparations for closing schools.

16 MR. BUDD: Thank you. The age old dilemma
17 in the non-public schools is how much of the cost do
18 you pass onto the parents. And so as a
19 tuition-based entity, we charge approximately in our
20 high schools about \$9,100. Our counterparts in
21 public school are funded to a much higher extent
22 than that \$9,100. So over the years, we've learned
23 how to get blood from a stone, so to speak.

24 The cost of operations as our buildings
25 age, as our need to compensate people at a

1 reasonable rate medical cost -- medical increases,
2 aging buildings, things of that nature. The cost of
3 operations has gotten far out ahead of the cost
4 turned over to the parents in the form of tuition
5 so. The amount of money that our schools have had
6 to raise from a development perspective to maintain
7 status quo has gotten greater. Many of our schools
8 do a tremendous job in raising money, hundreds of
9 thousands of dollars or more every year. But when
10 you raise money like that, the expectation is that
11 you have something shiny and permanent to point to
12 year after year.

13 So while we're tremendously proud to
14 reinvest it in our students and our teachers, again,
15 the distance between the cost of operations and the
16 tuition continues to get greater. So that is
17 something that we're -- you know, again, is probably
18 going to be exacerbated by COVID. And you know, I
19 made mention of that in my testimony with regards to
20 our ability to fund raise and run fundraisers and do
21 development. So we'll continue to keep an eye on
22 that.

23 MR. NIELS: I would just add that the
24 pressures from COVID have been equipment, a
25 tremendous amount of equipment. You know, as I

1 suggested in my testimony, the pressures on these
2 schools to remain open has meant for many of them
3 that they've had to rent or in some cases buy tents.
4 These tents have been costly. You know, PPE masks,
5 testing service, many of our schools -- one of our
6 schools mentioned to me yesterday that they
7 anticipate that they've spent half a million dollars
8 preparing to remain open this school year.

9 In some cases because, you know, in the
10 hybrid model they've had students on, you know, one
11 group of students coming on Monday, one group of
12 students coming on Tuesday, but they've had to
13 because of six feet of distancing, really put a cap
14 on their enrollment. So some of our shortages in
15 some of our schools have been due to the limitations
16 of space that the school could possibly handle, even
17 in a hybrid model, as well.

18 So I think some of our schools are really
19 hurting from this. And as Jason and others have
20 mentioned, some of the funding has not been -- has
21 been somewhat disappointing. I know many of our
22 schools have taken advantage of the PPP loans and
23 that's been a Godsend for many of them.

24 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: And again, I hate
25 to press. I don't wish this on any of your

1 districts or any of your schools, I'm sorry, but
2 appreciating that they're all, perhaps,
3 unfortunately, a little bit smaller, any sense or
4 protocols that you all have in place around should a
5 need to close, how they will continue to exit and
6 reallocate students to the appropriate placements?

7 MR. BUDD: So again, an unfortunate aspect
8 of running a school system such as the Archdiocese,
9 a tuition-based system, is that it's becoming
10 increasingly more difficult for our parents to
11 afford the tuition. And so we're in a situation,
12 personally at my school, where it has been
13 determined that the school will close. And so to
14 your point, we're working with parents, we're
15 working with families, we're repurposing employees
16 who would have been working towards next year,
17 creating a landing spot for incoming eighth graders,
18 incoming freshman next year.

19 we've repurposed them to work with parents
20 who are looking for new schools to land at. And so
21 we have a formalized process for that, and we'll
22 continue to formalize it through this year and
23 hopefully we don't have to replicate it any time
24 soon or anywhere else.

25 MR. NIELS: I just would like to add that I

1 think one of the -- going into this year, there was
2 a tremendous mystery as to what our enrollments
3 would look like. People had no idea in June and
4 July what our independent school enrollments would
5 be. And they ended up being, as I've suggested,
6 fairly good. Especially the larger, more-resources
7 schools have really enjoyed, in most cases, full
8 enrollment.

9 I think one of the questions that's being
10 asked right now is next year, if public schools open
11 in person, will some of the families who fled public
12 schools and came to our schools because we were
13 offering in-person learning go back to the public
14 schools and therefore some of our enrollment be
15 drained away. So that's just a question that's
16 being asked in my circles these days.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Next will be
18 Representative Lewis.

19 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Thank you,
20 Mr. Chairman.

21 I have two questions here. One is for
22 Jason. And good afternoon, Jason.

23 I also have a Bishop McDevitt in my
24 district here in Dauphin County, so it's good to see
25 you. I wanted to ask you specifically, you talked

1 about -- we've heard about tuition and the
2 difficulty with paying some of these tuition rates.
3 And I just want to -- as we talk about reopening and
4 that goal that we all share, I know that the EITC
5 Program has been key to helping a lot of families.
6 And I just wanted to ask you, from your perspective,
7 what that program means to your students and how it
8 has affected your school and whether that's been
9 beneficial for families at your school.

10 And I'm going to follow that up with a
11 question, so Gary and Maria can be ready. The next
12 question is just what percentage of your member
13 schools are currently open for in-person
14 instruction? So kind of a two-prong question; one
15 to Jason and one to Gary or Maria.

16 Thank you.

17 MR. BUDD: Representative Lewis, thank you
18 for that question. And Bishop McDevitt of
19 Harrisburg's principal has reached out to us to
20 offer his respects with regards to the announcement
21 of the closure. I'm grateful for that.

22 The EITC Program is a tremendous program.
23 We can't say enough about it. It's a fair program.
24 It's a program that is growing in leaps and bounds
25 through the country in various forms and in other

1 states and Commonwealths, particularly Florida and
2 Arizona. And so we are, one, thankful for the
3 program and what it has done for our families to
4 help them afford an education. Bishop McDevitt, the
5 one that I reside at, here in Wyncote, we're blessed
6 to reside in this beautiful bucolic suburban
7 neighborhood, but 70 percent of the students that
8 attend Bishop McDevitt come from the inner city of
9 Philadelphia.

10 An EITC, and particularly OSTC, afford them
11 and their parents an opportunity to make a decision
12 that otherwise would not be afforded to them. We're
13 so upset with the announcement here, but you know,
14 we're grateful for what OSTC has done for these
15 families. And any opportunity to increase EITC and
16 OSTC, I would be happy to speak to anybody about its
17 merits. It's a fair and equitable program, and it
18 provides opportunities, not only for students, but
19 also for the families.

20 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Thank you. Thank
21 you.

22 MR. NIELS: Could you repeat your question
23 to us?

24 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Sure thing, Gary. I
25 was just -- it's simple. What percentage of your

1 member schools are currently open for in-person
2 instruction?

3 MR. NIELS: I would say all of them are
4 offering options for in-person.

5 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Excellent. Okay.

6 MR. NIELS: By the way -- by the way, I
7 just want to echo what Jason just said. I was the
8 head of a Pittsburgh independent school for six
9 years. I can't say enough about EITC, the kind of
10 kids it brought to our school and the opportunity it
11 provided to us to have a diverse student population.
12 I can't say enough about it, and I applaud the State
13 for its consistent commitment to it, as well.

14 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Gary, on that
15 note -- I will do a quick follow-up, if I may,
16 Chairman -- because I am excited to see there's been
17 broad bipartisan support for these programs.

18 Have you seen kind of a dynamic where more
19 kids would have more opportunities in the schools
20 you've talked about if this -- if the levels were to
21 increase, if the -- if we were to be able to maybe
22 increase that program?

23 I've heard there's roughly 40 to 43,000
24 kids on the waiting list for scholarships. Have you
25 seen where, were there to be an increase in the EITC

1 funding, perhaps more kids would have opportunities.

2 MR. NIELS: Absolutely. I mean, I don't
3 know how to say it more strongly. Amen, brother.
4 And you know, the year after I resigned, I stepped
5 down as head of Winchester Thurston School. I took
6 over as president of the Neighborhood Academy, which
7 is a school for low-income students. Every one of
8 those students was there thanks to EITC funding, and
9 it was just a remarkable program in Pittsburgh where
10 there was so little hope for so many
11 African-American families. And what that school did
12 for those kids, if they could grow their student
13 body by even more, it would be a beacon of light for
14 many of those kids who had such little hope, except
15 for EITC funding.

16 REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS: Thank you, Gary.
17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
19 Zabel.

20 REPRESENTATIVE ZABEL: Thank you,
21 Mr. Chair.

22 I have a question that goes to a bit of
23 practical advice I hope you might be able to give
24 us. I'm a product of the Archdiocesan schools in
25 southeastern Pennsylvania myself, and I have three

1 within a mile of my house currently. And I've been
2 watching them in the fall. In particular this past
3 fall, they committed to providing either four or
4 five-day in-person instruction from the outset. And
5 they, by talking to constituents and all objective
6 measures, they appear to have been pulling it off
7 pretty successfully, particularly at the elementary
8 school level.

9 So my question would be, as we look to kind
10 of expand and get people back in classrooms, at
11 least the schools in my area, the Archdiocesan
12 schools, have been doing this as a practical matter.
13 And I'm wondering if you have any practical lessons
14 you've learned along the way about what are
15 effective mitigation procedures, safety procedures,
16 stuff that we can carry over into other classrooms
17 that work well? Because I know, for example, in the
18 Archdiocesan schools that are in my district, these
19 are old buildings.

20 They're not particularly -- they're not
21 particularly expansive. The economics of the school
22 require the classes to have a certain minimum size,
23 how -- is there anything, particularly for Mr. Budd,
24 but also to Mr. Niels to the extent that you have --
25 you've dealt with old facilities and keeping kids in

1 the classroom, if there have been safety practices
2 that you found to work particularly well to keeping
3 our kids in school and our teachers safe.

4 Thank you.

5 MR. BUDD: Mr. Representative, I really
6 appreciate that question because it allows me to
7 brag about our teachers just a little bit more.
8 I've been in education for 26 years and it seems
9 like we've been chasing the sweet spot of technology
10 for that entire time, what is the best application
11 of technology for the last 25 years. And while we
12 are entirely grateful for the bridge that that
13 provided us last spring when the initial shutdown
14 occurred, every educator that I spoke with expressed
15 that they missed the classroom experience. And that
16 sentiment was obviously echoed by our parents and
17 students. Students who would look at the clock and
18 wish for eighth period to end, they were now looking
19 forward to getting back into school.

20 And so how do you get to the point where
21 you're able to offer four to five days of in-person
22 instruction? You work with your parents. You work
23 with your teachers. You develop a rapport with
24 them. Again, it's not perfect. There are moments
25 and weeks and months of consternation back and

1 forth, but in our mission-driven system, our
2 teachers wanted to be in the buildings with the
3 kids. Our kids wanted to be in the building with
4 the teachers. The parents wanted them in the
5 building.

6 And so we were benefitting from a
7 confluence of spirit in terms of intention, and we
8 were grateful for that. Trials and tribulations
9 throughout the day, no doubt, but again, it stems
10 from having a relationship with your teachers and
11 students and knowing that you have their best
12 interest at heart and a trust level. And again, we
13 have much work to do and are continuing to sharpen
14 those relationships as best as possible, but I can't
15 point to anything other than those relationships
16 that have gotten us to this point.

17 MR. NIELS: Yeah, I just want to add, as a
18 parent of two school-age children, as someone who's,
19 even though I'm running an association now, still in
20 touch with many teachers, and of course hear from
21 school heads. I can't say this loudly enough. It
22 is unbelievable what these people have accomplished.
23 And school heads, administrators, teachers, many of
24 them have had no breaks since this whole thing hit.

25 I wouldn't wish this on anyone. And to be

1 very honest and very candid, throughout the summer I
2 had no idea how schools were going to open safely,
3 and I was a skeptic myself. What they've done to
4 accomplish this is just extraordinary. But teachers
5 are exhausted, and teaching in a classroom where you
6 have in-person instruction right in front of you,
7 behind Plexiglass separated and then cameras that
8 you have to be aware of, when kids that you're
9 trying to at the same time reach, who are attending
10 the class virtually, this is so hard.

11 And I just hope and pray that Moderna and
12 Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson hold up against all
13 these variations because I think everyone is really
14 hoping that on September 1, we're all going to be
15 back in school. So if that doesn't answer your
16 question, I don't -- you know, I just hope this
17 doesn't continue. That's all I can say.

18 REPRESENTATIVE ZABEL: I appreciate that.
19 I was a teacher at an independent school myself, and
20 I think there's a broad sense within this Committee
21 and the legislature in general about the need to
22 push up our educators in terms of educational
23 priority, because as I recall, as a teacher, I think
24 I had a cold from September through April of every
25 single school year, pretty much nonstop. So that's

1 definitely got to be a priority to getting us back
2 there.

3 Thank you.

4 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
5 Kail.

6 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: Thank you,
7 Mr. Chairman. And I'm kind of going to follow up on
8 the last two questions, real simple. And Mr. Niels,
9 you answered for Representative Lewis regarding the
10 amount of schools that you all have that are open
11 face-to-face. And we've been talking about this,
12 and it's critical that schools are open
13 face-to-face, in my opinion.

14 And I'm just wondering, what is the
15 inherent advantage or how can you guys have such
16 broad 99 percent of your schools open face-to-face,
17 but we don't see that in the public's face?

18 I don't -- I don't want to cause a fight or
19 anything of that nature. I'm not looking for that.
20 I'm just generally curious how that works for you,
21 but it's not working at that same ratio, anyway, for
22 public schools?

23 MR. NIELS: Well, you know, I just want to
24 say -- I don't want to get myself in trouble here.
25 I believe in unions, but in Penn schools, we don't

1 have teacher unions. If we had teacher unions, we
2 probably would not be open. And I know many of our
3 teachers came back kicking and screaming, so it has
4 a lot to do with that.

5 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: I appreciate your
6 candidness.

7 That's all I have, Mr. Chairman.

8 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Excuse me. And
9 I have a question for Maria.

10 Maria, as an approved private school, I'm
11 first of all curious, you know, do you get most of
12 your contact initially from school districts seeking
13 you out or from parents seeking you out?

14 MS. KREITER: It's really a combination of
15 both. We work in partnership with all LEAs and
16 families alike. The referral initially comes from
17 the school district, and the parents have the
18 opportunity to visit as many schools as the district
19 refers. So ultimately, it's the choice of the
20 parent and it's in partnership with the district.

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: And do you
22 believe that the districts have, you know, given you
23 enough support to be able to continue to educate the
24 child from that district?

25 In other words, you know, obviously, you're

1 under tremendous amounts of pressure. You're
2 dealing with one of the most difficult populations,
3 which requires probably more often than not
4 one-on-one type of instruction.

5 So how are you, you know, accomplishing
6 that? And how much support are you really getting
7 from the school system?

8 MS. KREITER: With the school system, it's
9 always a partnership working, you know, with the
10 district and with the families. But we have
11 identified a number of very small successes,
12 unbelievably as a matter of COVID. All of our
13 schools have had to come up with innovative
14 practices, and we do everything out-of-the-box
15 thinking because it obviously doesn't come from
16 budget increases or necessarily partnering with
17 districts.

18 But I would say part of the key of why we
19 are -- we are in good faith with the districts is
20 because of the incredible strengthened relationships
21 we are having with parents. I can speak to you and
22 know that, on behalf of the membership of the
23 alliance, we have daily communication, daily phone
24 calls, virtual instruction, assistance to help
25 parents or caregivers log in for instruction. We

1 have repeated phone calls and follow-up meetings
2 with our clinicians that could be therapists, social
3 workers, counselors to check in on families and
4 their mental health and know that the districts
5 really appreciate that.

6 we've also had some high student
7 participation because of the challenges of some of
8 our kids. Some of the students are finding the --
9 not being in the classroom is being a little less
10 distracting, so they can focus directly with the
11 teacher since we have a smaller classroom
12 teacher-student ratio. And we have a number of
13 other staff members that help support students
14 one-on-one.

15 So I do think that the districts really
16 appreciate what we do to assist the families.
17 Really, we work for the LEAs; we work with the LEAs.
18 And we are here, obviously, to serve the children
19 and their families.

20 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

21 I would like to thank the panel. Very much
22 appreciate all of the input that you've given us
23 today.

24 MR. NIELS: Thank you for the opportunity.

25 MS. KREITER: Thank you for having us

1 today.

2 MR. BUDD: Likewise. Thank you. It was an
3 honor to be here.

4 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Again, thank
5 you.

6 And now we are going to move on to our last
7 panel, I believe. I know there were some changes,
8 so I hopefully will get this right. We'll have
9 Arthur Steinberg, who would be the President of the
10 American Federation of Teachers. Oh boy,
11 Linardopoulos is presenting on behalf of Jerry
12 Jordan.

13 MS. LINARDOPOULOS: Linardopoulos. Thank
14 you.

15 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: which would be
16 the President of the Philadelphia Federation of
17 Teachers; and Joyce Wilkerson, Board President,
18 Philadelphia School District; William Hite, Jr., the
19 Superintendent of Philadelphia School District.

20 So thank you all for being here. If you
21 would all please rise and raise your right hand to
22 be sworn in.

23 (Whereupon, testifiers were sworn en masse.)

24 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

25 And I guess Arthur Steinberg, you can

1 proceed first.

2 MR. STEINBERG: Okay. Thank you, Chairman
3 Sonney, Chair Longietti, and the rest of the members
4 of this Committee for giving me the opportunity to
5 testify on this really important matter relating to
6 the -- can you -- are you hearing an echo?

7 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Yes. Turn your
8 speaker down a little.

9 MR. STEINBERG: I will do that. How's
10 that?

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Not yet.

12 MR. STEINBERG: How about now?

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: No.

14 MR. STEINBERG: Now?

15 Maybe I ought to sign out, sign back in,
16 and let someone else go first.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: No. No. Turn
18 off your speaker.

19 MR. STEINBERG: Turn it off. Okay.

20 Now you can hear me?

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Perfect.

22 MR. STEINBERG: Okay. Again, thank you
23 Chairman Sonney, Chair Longietti, and the rest of
24 the Committee for giving me this opportunity to
25 testify. I'm Arthur Steinberg, President of the

1 American Federation of Teachers. We represent 61
2 locals and 36,000 members across all the corners of
3 this Commonwealth.

4 Make no mistake, learning has continued
5 since school buildings were closed in March. This
6 instruction has not always been traditional, but it
7 has been nothing short of remarkable and heroic. I
8 also want to state unequivocally, the teachers want
9 to be back in their classrooms as soon as it is
10 deemed safe. In fact, over 80 percent of educators
11 polled said that they would return to classrooms
12 with safeguards in place. But the COVID-19 pandemic
13 has cast into stark relief the inadequacies in our
14 public education system.

15 wealthier school districts whose buildings
16 are newer and with better ventilation systems, whose
17 students are provided a computer, and whose families
18 or able to have access to more high speed broadband
19 internet, have been nimble anymore enough in the
20 face of these ever-changing circumstances to pivot
21 to whatever kind of learning they need. While in
22 poorer districts in urban, suburban, and rural
23 communities, students and educators struggle with
24 internet connectivity.

25 School buildings were unsafe before the

1 pandemic even began through the decades of
2 disinvestment and the presence of toxins like lead,
3 mold, and asbestos. These conditions have been
4 especially prevalent and egregious in communities of
5 color, many of which are represented by our union.
6 Large districts that know that without adequate
7 resources have been forced to make decisions
8 affecting -- and walk a tightrope between the safety
9 of their students and educators and providing an
10 in-person education.

11 Last April, 10 months ago, the American
12 Federation of Teachers created a plan to safely
13 reopen school buildings and communities with what we
14 believed then and now is proper virus mitigation
15 strategies. Schools could return to in-person
16 learning, that meant physical distancing, improved
17 ventilation, masking, and adequate -- and that was
18 before anyone believed that we could actually have a
19 vaccine developed by the end of the year, which is a
20 very positive development.

21 In a poll released last week, 8 out of 10
22 educators supported a return to in-person learning
23 with safety guardrails in place; and by a similar
24 margin approved of the Biden Administration's plan
25 to make reopening schools safely a reality. The

1 survey found that just 16 percent of educators think
2 the school system has gone too far in planning
3 reopening. And 85 percent would be comfortable
4 working in classrooms if the AFTs multilayered
5 mitigation strategies were put into place. And I
6 want to add again and repeat that vaccination and
7 access to it is a critical component of that.

8 Our school's physical plan must be a
9 priority for this legislature. Much of the reason
10 districts continue remote learning even when
11 evidence has suggested that in-person learning could
12 in theory be safe, is if the building mechanics
13 required to make it safe are lacking. And we need
14 to ensure that broadband is readily available to all
15 students, regardless of zip code or family income.
16 If all goes as planned for the rollout of
17 vaccinations, our school districts will also need to
18 prepare for a robust summer learning program.

19 Because of the disruption these last two
20 years, students will need help to catch up. And
21 realizing that what has been visited upon us in this
22 virus has been a major disaster, our schools must
23 create and deliver robust social services, including
24 mental health, trauma counseling programs for
25 students, staff, and families alike. Just two

1 months into the pandemic last May, our national
2 union established a trauma counseling benefit,
3 realizing that the work to educate, heal, and help
4 serve our communities is stressful and critical.
5 Especially given that black, brown, and people of
6 color -- which is kind of redundant -- are born at
7 disproportionately high price of the pandemic with
8 higher rates of illness, death, and economic
9 insecurity. We must invest in these services where
10 they are needed most.

11 Our schools need to be prepared to help
12 students and staff who may have lost one or more
13 members of their family to this deadly disease or
14 those whose economic circumstances have changed due
15 to lost income or other trauma. And while I
16 recognize that this is not a budget discussion, all
17 of these aspects of virus mitigation, of
18 infrastructure investment and technology cost money.
19 I would be derelict in my duty as a public school
20 advocate if I did not testify that the thing schools
21 need most is money run through the fair funding
22 formula.

23 Thank you for inviting me to speak, and I
24 look forward to any of your questions.

25 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

1 Hillary, are you ready to be next?

2 MS. LINARDOPOULOS: Sure. Good afternoon,
3 Chairman Sonney and Chairman Longietti.

4 My name is Hillary Linardopoulos. I am the
5 legislative representative for the Philadelphia
6 Federation on Teachers. I very much appreciate the
7 opportunity to be here today and testify on behalf
8 of PFT President Jerry Jordan and our more than
9 13,000 members.

10 I really appreciate the topic of this
11 hearing as reopening school buildings across
12 Pennsylvania. And I say buildings because amidst
13 all of the turmoil and devastation wrought by
14 COVID-19, schools have been open. Buildings are
15 what have been closed. But let's be very clear, our
16 goal at the PFT has been and will continue to be to
17 reopen buildings because we know that inside of a
18 classroom is where the true magic of learning takes
19 place. Virtual education will never replace
20 in-person learning.

21 But nonetheless, educators, parents, and
22 students alike have engaged in herculean efforts to
23 continue teaching and learning throughout this
24 pandemic. Our members conduct virtual culinary
25 lessons, science labs in their kitchen, and have

1 immersed themselves in professional development and
2 research to learn new tools that have helped them
3 reach their students.

4 Teachers are delivering learning materials
5 to the home of each and every single one of their
6 students. Believe me, our educators, like all
7 educators in Pennsylvania, will tell you that they
8 are working harder than ever, and it is much easier
9 to deliver instruction in person. It's far from an
10 ideal situation right now, and particularly for
11 students with special needs, for English language
12 learners.

13 For students experiencing poverty, the
14 challenges of virtual learning can be compounded.
15 And we fully appreciate and agree with the urgency
16 for return to in-person learning when it is safe to
17 do so. But we also know that we're in the midst of
18 a global pandemic, the likes of which none of us
19 have ever seen, a global pandemic that like so much
20 in society, disproportionately impacts black and
21 brown communities. And we know that even before the
22 pandemic hit, a deeply inequitable system rooted in
23 systemic racism left Philadelphia's children
24 shortchanged.

25 The facilities crisis in Philadelphia is

1 not new, and it's why the Federation has fought so
2 hard to find real solutions to a devastating crisis
3 that has impacted students across the Commonwealth.
4 It's why we founded the Fund our Facilities
5 Coalition because decades of neglect had left toxic
6 conditions plaguing our schools. It's why more than
7 70 partners, including members of this Committee,
8 have joined the Coalition and continue to advocate
9 for a \$200 million investment to ensure that
10 Philadelphia's buildings are free from toxins like
11 lead and asbestos, as well as ensuring that we have
12 the resources needed to address issues like ancient
13 ventilation systems, which is critical to mitigating
14 COVID.

15 This union has not and will never stand in
16 the way of a safe reopening of Philadelphia's school
17 buildings, but we will not allow our members lives
18 and the lives of the students they serve to be
19 jeopardized by a return to buildings without proper
20 data or mitigation efforts in place. It's why we
21 sought out the intervention of the neutral third
22 party as negotiating by the district and the union
23 as a means of evaluating our concerns, and that
24 process is underway now.

25 Our educators, families, and communities

1 have been clear. We want to be returned to school
2 buildings when it is safe to do so. Any approach to
3 mitigating COVID must be layered because without a
4 layered strategy, we jeopardize the safety of
5 children and educators alike. In fact, yesterday
6 the CDC released results of a study from Georgia
7 that showed that COVID can and does spread in school
8 buildings, and CDC Director Dr. Walensky noted that
9 educators played an important role in the spread.
10 They, too, pointed to a multilayered mitigation
11 schedule as being critical.

12 The vaccine is a key to this multilayered
13 strategy, which is why we've advocated for, in
14 partnership with many of you, an expedited rollout
15 for our educators. If we as a Commonwealth, and as
16 a nation, are truly committed to a safe reopening of
17 the buildings, then we know that vaccination must be
18 a key. We are pleased that educators and school
19 staff have begun to receive their first dose of
20 vaccine through a CHOP school district partnership,
21 and the urgency of this effort cannot be overstated.

22 I'll conclude by simply reiterating how
23 important we know a return to in-person learning is
24 to our young people. We are and have been deeply
25 committed to finding workable solutions to making a

1 return to in-person learning possible. And we are
2 also simultaneously deeply committed to safeguarding
3 the health of the young people and educators that we
4 serve.

5 Thank you for this opportunity.

6 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

7 And I'm not sure if we have Joyce or
8 William Hite.

9 DR. HITE: Good afternoon. You have
10 William Hite.

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Good. You may
12 proceed.

13 DR. HITE: Thank you. Thank you so much.
14 And good afternoon, Chairman Sonney and Chairman
15 Longietti and distinguished members of the House
16 Education Committee.

17 I am William Hite, Superintendent of the
18 School District of Philadelphia. Unfortunately, our
19 Board President, Joyce Wilkerson could not be with
20 us today. I appreciate the opportunity to provide
21 you with information on how the COVID-19 pandemic
22 has impacted our schools and students. I previously
23 submitted testimony for the record, and I hope the
24 information I provided is helpful. I'm going to use
25 my time today, however, to highlight components of

1 that testimony, including the work we have done to
2 support a safe return to in-person learning, the
3 impact of the pandemic on student learning, and an
4 update on our efforts to bring back PreK through
5 second grade students.

6 First, just like districts across the
7 Commonwealth, COVID-19 pandemic has had a
8 significant impact on our students, families, our
9 teachers, our school-based staff, and schools.
10 Shifting 125,000 students to a remote learning
11 program was a herculean effort. And I am so
12 grateful for the work our teachers have done. And
13 you've already heard testimony from both Arthur and
14 Hillary, and I couldn't agree with either of them
15 more, that while schools have been closed, education
16 is happening. But we also have school-based staff
17 who have been in schools, and the work that they've
18 done to adapt to a new learning environment while
19 working to support the educational needs of our
20 students and families, but we know that students
21 learn best in classrooms as was just mentioned.

22 Since closing last March, our top priority
23 has been and continues to be to return students
24 safely to school buildings. To accomplish this
25 goal, we have invested approximately \$65 million in

1 personal protective equipment for students and
2 staff, touchless hand sanitizer stations, Plexiglass
3 partitions, ventilation repair for fresh air flow,
4 social distancing signage, and other layers of
5 safety that are proven to keep the level of virus
6 transmission in schools low.

7 Additionally, we spent \$250 million in our
8 buildings to address lead and asbestos to make other
9 improvements, and we completed a comprehensive
10 ventilation assessment of every occupied space in
11 schools and provided a certified assessment report
12 of outside airflow to school staff and to the
13 general public. We did clean and disinfected every
14 school using expanded cleaning protocols and added
15 and hired and trained new custodians. And we
16 installed IT and CCTV in our places and completed
17 ventilation projects in another 117 facilities.

18 Two weeks ago, the Centers for Disease
19 Control and Prevention released guidelines for
20 safely reopening schools, as has been mentioned.
21 And I can confidently say that the School District
22 of Philadelphia is in full compliance. We have done
23 all of this work because we know our students,
24 especially our youngest learners, are those with
25 complex needs. And even though our teachers have

1 done herculean efforts to support our young people
2 while they have been in person, as was mentioned
3 earlier, there is not a sufficient replacement for
4 in-person learning. We know they learn best in the
5 classroom with a great teacher and other caring
6 staff to nurture and support them.

7 Unfortunately, we are already seeing the
8 impact of remote learning on academic achievement,
9 and this is no fault of individuals and the efforts
10 that they're making, especially our committed
11 teachers and other instructional staff. But in a
12 district-administered assessment, we found that
13 currently in grades first through fifth grade they
14 declined an average of six percentiles from 20 --
15 from '19-'20 winter assessment to this year's fall
16 assessments.

17 Some of this decline is not unexpected.
18 Previous research has identified what happens during
19 the summer learning loss, and that's a problem
20 nationwide. What is striking about the decline is
21 how large it is for students who were in -- who were
22 kindergartners last year and then first graders this
23 year. And while comparing kindergartners to first
24 grade students, showed a decline of seven percentile
25 points in the prior school year to the next fall.

1 In the school year before COVID-19, during
2 remote learning, the decline from last winter to
3 this fall was 15 percentiles for this year's first
4 graders who were kindergartners a year ago. This is
5 the largest decline among all student cohorts who
6 took the assessment. And it underscores the
7 importance of returning our youngest learners to
8 school buildings as quickly and as safely as
9 possible, but it's not just the Board and the
10 district administration who wants students back in
11 classrooms. It's also our families.

12 There are families across all grade levels
13 who want the students to resume in-person learning,
14 including the parents 9,000 PreK through second
15 grade students who have signed their children up for
16 a hybrid program. The district's plan to return to
17 in-person instruction has faced some challenges, but
18 we know if 58 of 62 southeastern Pennsylvania school
19 districts can open safely for in-person instruction,
20 we can too. We know if other urban districts across
21 the country, including those in other urban cities
22 like Boston, Chicago, D.C., New York, Baltimore can
23 open safely for in-person instruction, we can too.

24 And we know if more than 200 parochial and
25 private schools within the city can open safely for

1 in-person instruction, we can too. I know we all
2 agree families, teachers, the district, and our
3 elected officials on the importance of reopening
4 public schools for in-person learning. A
5 disagreement has focused on how to do it safely.
6 These are legitimate concerns, make no mistakes
7 about it. And we need to address them with our
8 parents and students and with our teachers and our
9 staff members.

10 And we want to make clear that we are
11 committed here in the School District of
12 Philadelphia to continuing our work with the
13 Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and the
14 Philadelphia Department of Public Health to
15 facilitate the safe return of teachers and students
16 through the following measures. And some of these
17 were talked about earlier. In partnership with the
18 Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, we have secured
19 ample supplies of rapid testing kits, and we will
20 make rapid testing available to all teachers and
21 staff working in schools. They'll be tested once a
22 week to help detect positive COVID-19 cases and
23 prevent the spread of the virus.

24 Also in partnership with the Philadelphia
25 and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, we

1 have begun rolling out COVID-19 vaccine
2 appointments, starting first with staff who've
3 already been working in our school buildings and
4 those who are set to return to support our PreK
5 through second grade students. I would also add
6 that these vaccines -- this vaccine strategy is also
7 available for other sectors, as well, the private
8 sector, the Archdiocesan, and charter schools, as
9 well as daycare providers.

10 The district has developed a process to
11 actively support the city's contact tracing efforts,
12 which will help mitigate the spread of the virus in
13 school communities. We're committed to following
14 the guidance of health experts to keep our students
15 and staff safe. We appreciate legitimate concerns
16 about building safety. They are old buildings and
17 they have not had the attention or maintenance or we
18 have not had the resources available for decades to
19 address them. And we agree that no one should be
20 asked to return to a school unless it is safe to do
21 so.

22 And we know that the best way to enhance
23 the health and safety of all is to have multiple
24 layers of safety. We've put in place extensive
25 health and safety protocols for students and adults.

1 We have extensive inventory of PPP to staff and
2 students to support mandatory mask wearing and
3 facial coverings in schools as well as new classroom
4 and bathroom setups to ensure social distancing,
5 touchless hand sanitizer stations in the hallways,
6 cleaning supply stations in classrooms, maximum
7 occupancy signs outside each room, signage
8 throughout the schools and enhanced cleaning
9 protocols using EPA cleaning products.

10 We are scheduled to have 9,000 PreK through
11 second grade students return for two days a week at
12 approximately 150 school buildings, starting on
13 March 1st. While the conditions of these buildings
14 vary, often depending on their age, the District
15 believes that all are safe for reopening. For
16 returning families who want to come to the school
17 and see for themselves the work that has been done
18 for the safety of the children, we are hosting open
19 houses that comply with our health and safety
20 protocols at each and every school we seek to
21 reopen. We will be able to detail the steps we have
22 taken to address the concerns and any questions.

23 I know that all of us recognize the
24 importance of reopening schools for in-person
25 learning, and we believe all sides have the best

1 interest of our children at heart. I want to work
2 together to resolve our differences and make this
3 happen. Thank you again for taking the time and
4 opportunity to allow me to testify before you today.
5 I'm pleased to provide you with any additional
6 information you need and answer any questions that
7 you may have.

8 Thank you once again.

9 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

10 Representative Isaacson.

11 REPRESENTATIVE ISAACSON: Well, this is our
12 last panel, so I will -- and it is my home district,
13 so good afternoon and thank you, all three of you
14 for testifying.

15 And for those that are new to the Education
16 Committee, just -- you know, Philadelphia is the
17 largest public school district in the State. And up
18 until a few years ago, our school district, in case
19 you didn't know, was managed by the State. We only
20 have gotten local control back recently, and the
21 trials and tribulations of getting ourselves off the
22 ground in self-management is something that is being
23 worked on every day, but we have to recognize that
24 some of the conditions that were discussed with
25 regard to the State of the Philadelphia School

1 District is -- a responsibility we as a State have
2 to take on because we did not make investments when
3 we controlled it and had the governance over it,
4 which is why some of the schools are in the state
5 that they are in. There was no investment made and
6 that's something we have to own.

7 Philadelphia is also unique to many of your
8 districts. We are landlocked. There is no open
9 land to go buy to build a state-of-the-art facility
10 to replace the aging infrastructure that we have, so
11 all we have is rehabilitation. And we have to
12 rehabilitate lead and asbestos in most of the
13 schools, and that's a major infrastructure project
14 that faces the school district, but also some of
15 yours, I'm sure.

16 So I just did want to throw that out there
17 that that's something that's ongoing and that has
18 been also very much of a discussion in the city, as
19 well as educating our students over the past year.
20 And it's going to continue. So don't think that we
21 as an Education Committee are at the end of hearing
22 about it because it's a continued conversation and
23 we need to start talking about creating funding
24 streams to deal with these infrastructure problems
25 since we have not done that for the past decade or

1 so here in Pennsylvania.

2 so that being said, so that you have some
3 background of what we're dealing with in
4 Philadelphia, we are trying to get back to levels of
5 educating children in school as much as possible
6 because we all know there is no substitute for
7 in-person learning. And every single teacher that I
8 speak to cannot wait to get back to the classroom.

9 There is not a situation where I have heard
10 from any teacher that they don't want to go back.
11 They miss their students. They're dying to go back.
12 We just have to figure out how to do it safely,
13 frankly, in buildings that have all sorts of
14 problems, including ventilation and we all know that
15 that's very much an important factor from every
16 doctor, nurse, and professional about opening up
17 schools safely. So I do commend the school district
18 for the work they've been doing and the investments
19 they've made. And I'm certain that everybody is
20 going to come and find a way to get our children
21 back to school.

22 And so I just was -- it was more of
23 informational comments I wanted to make for those
24 who are new to this Committee and the state of the
25 Philadelphia School District. You can read a lot in

1 the papers or hear, you know, blogs and social media
2 about what's going on. But what's really going on
3 is that we have a great investment that we need to
4 make in our largest school district and we all have
5 to make it together as a State and as a city. So
6 thank you very much.

7 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
8 Ciresi.

9 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you. And
10 thank you to the three of you who are here on the
11 call.

12 You know, I found it interesting one of the
13 comments that Representative Isaacson just made, how
14 our teachers are looking to get back to the schools.
15 And we all know that you lost a few teachers due to
16 the conditions in those schools last year because of
17 the updates that needed to be made, especially with
18 the asbestos and lead paint, which is an ongoing
19 issue that I feel is one of the biggest ones we need
20 to take on as a state.

21 Having said that, Superintendent Hite, you
22 referred to the systems as being upgraded with the
23 airflow within the buildings, but I wondered if --
24 how many of those buildings that's happened with
25 because I know I've been in a lot of your schools

1 and I'm shocked at the conditions of the buildings
2 compared to the schools in my district. And with
3 this virus, that's a huge issue beyond everything
4 else that's going on in your buildings.

5 So can you talk about that just for a
6 minute and, you know, how much money it would take
7 to upgrade some of those systems?

8 DR. HITE: Yeah, thank you. Thank you,
9 Representative Ciresi, for the question.

10 And so to your point, we were fortunate
11 enough to receive a \$100-million commitment from the
12 University of Pennsylvania to deal with some of the
13 environmental issues. We had, I think, from -- I
14 think I remember when you came to visit some of the
15 schools. And that was right after we a facility
16 analysis done. And that facility analysis was done
17 by a group called Parsons, and they were actually
18 looking at the conditions of buildings based on the
19 code requirements for those buildings and the vast
20 majority of -- the average age of our buildings is
21 70 years old.

22 We have some 227 buildings that we utilize.
23 Those buildings, the price tag just to bring all of
24 the facilities that were included in that report to
25 code, this is not to meet 24th century education

1 standards, but just to code was a \$4.5 billion price
2 tag just to do the code-related things. We have --
3 we have made an investment on the ventilation
4 systems, opening dampers, repairing those dampers.
5 And cases where we were unable to repair the boiler
6 system or the HVAC system, we had some schools in
7 which we installed window fans in windows to
8 introduce fresh air into the facilities and that
9 work continues to happen in our schools. We also
10 did an outside air analysis in every single space
11 that we intend to use. And if, in fact, that air
12 analysis determines that we can have a number of
13 individuals in the classroom or in the space, we
14 would then apply that number on top of the social
15 distancing guidelines, and then it comes up with a
16 maximum number of individuals who could be in that
17 space.

18 And so that's what we've done to prepare
19 schools. But during this period of time that
20 schools have been closed, we've been focused on both
21 accelerating that lead abatement work and removing
22 asbestos. As a matter of fact, we have removed
23 hundreds of thousands of feet of asbestos since our
24 schools have been closed and we wanted to take
25 advantage of that opportunity to get those materials

1 out of schools.

2 REPRESENTATIVE CIRESI: Thank you.

3 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Chairman
4 Longietti.

5 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you all
6 for your testimony.

7 Dr. Hite, do you have any sense of what a
8 timeline might be for vaccinating teachers and
9 staff? You indicated in your testimony that
10 appointments are starting to be scheduled.

11 DR. HITE: Yes, thank you for that
12 question, Chairman Longietti. We have -- we
13 actually have individuals who've started to receive
14 those vaccinations. And the Children's Hospital of
15 Philadelphia started sending out, late last week,
16 invitations for the first week of individuals. And
17 that first week, I think, included about 25,000
18 individuals. This is not just the School District
19 of Philadelphia, as I indicated.

20 At the moment, they're able to provide
21 vaccinations for about 500 individuals. Next week
22 we will expand, or they will expand, the number of
23 testing sites. And they have indicated that they
24 would be able to vaccinate about 9,000 individuals a
25 week, to do that and then they anticipate the total

1 universe of educators in that space to be about
2 35,000.

3 So the invitations have gone out to the
4 first 25,000. They are prioritizing those
5 individuals based on who's in schools already and
6 then who would be serve K through 2nd grade
7 populations, and then all of the other educators who
8 may be coming back later, and then it would be the
9 other educational staff who may be -- who may have
10 contact with students or family members as a part of
11 their job.

12 And so that's -- that's the universe of
13 individuals. And they vaccinated 500 individuals
14 yesterday. They anticipate 500 more to receive the
15 vaccine today, and then -- for the remainder of this
16 week. And then, next week it will be the expanse of
17 sites. Four of those sites will be School District
18 of Philadelphia sites, one would still be the CHOP
19 Hospital location, one would be one of the private
20 schools, and then one of the Catholic schools.

21 They are located in all areas of the city,
22 and educators can make an appointment at any of
23 those facilities from any of the sectors.

24 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: So you think
25 -- I'm not sure I quite got the numbers right, but

1 are we looking at maybe four weeks for the folks to
2 have a first dose?

3 DR. HITE: They are anticipating about four
4 week, yes, four to -- I would say four to six weeks
5 depending on the availability, but I was just on
6 another conference call with the Children's
7 Hospital, and they've indicated because it's the
8 Pfizer vaccine that requires the more significant
9 refrigeration, then they don't -- at the moment,
10 they don't have a shortage of that. And they feel
11 like they can get up to 9,000 individuals vaccinated
12 a week.

13 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: And then, on
14 the comprehensive ventilation assessments, you know,
15 what -- are you able to give a thumbnail on like
16 what the needs are at this point?

17 DR. HITE: Yeah. So the -- it is -- the
18 needs are -- we had 32 schools where we actually
19 could not turn ventilation systems on. We've now
20 been able to make some repairs in some of those
21 schools, and I think we have taken six schools,
22 maybe eight schools off of that list. So that
23 number is down into the mid-20s.

24 But more importantly, the remaining systems
25 are still old systems, and many of them require

1 attention. And many of them require upgrades and
2 repair or replacement as a part of a much larger
3 capital program. And then there are some that we do
4 not want to -- do not want to turn on because
5 there's been asbestos work or lead abatement work
6 and you have to clean out all of the duct work
7 before you can turn fans on that may blow that into
8 the environment.

9 And so we are also being cognizant of that.
10 So the problem is pretty significant. And it's
11 significant more -- not just with the number of
12 buildings that need attention. It's significant
13 because of the age of our buildings. The fact that
14 there has not been an investment in deferred
15 maintenance over decades, and all of this stuff is
16 coming at one now. And the pandemic just exposed
17 how significantly problematic these ventilations --
18 not just the ventilation systems, but just old
19 buildings are with respect to ensuring that you have
20 appropriate ventilation and access to fresh air.

21 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you.

22 And I'm sure you probably have a similar
23 observation, but my sense is, as much as we want
24 this pandemic to go away as quickly as possible, my
25 sense is that we're going to be grappling with

1 elements of this over a period of years, and so
2 these needs are going to continue to be there.

3 DR. HITE: Yes.

4 MINORITY CHAIRMAN LONGIETTI: Thank you.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Representative
6 Gleim.

7 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: I thank you. I just
8 have a quick question for Miss Linardopoulos,
9 please.

10 Have the teachers discussed a situation
11 that -- where they are committed to coming back to
12 teach?

13 Is it just the vaccines or is there a
14 conglomeration of, you know, the COVID levels have
15 to be below five percent in the area, plus the
16 vaccines have to be administered?

17 Like, what is the -- what are the
18 discussions going on there?

19 MS. LINARDOPOULOS: Thank you,
20 Representative Gleim.

21 There are, you know -- and I will just say
22 that teachers are teaching right now, teaching and
23 working harder than ever in a really challenging
24 environment. In terms of a return to in-person
25 learning, the Federation and the district negotiated

1 a series of conditions that needed to be upheld in
2 order to ensure a safe return to school buildings.

3 There is currently discussion and
4 deliberation as to what of those conditions still
5 needs to be met. You know, and we've heard a lot
6 about the ventilation issue. That remains an area
7 of significant concern for the Federation.

8 (Inaudible) -- when we negotiated our Memorandum of
9 Agreement regarding the return to school buildings,
10 so we certainly believe it's an important layer of
11 mitigation. What we're really looking for is a
12 layered strategy, and that includes, you know, that
13 includes case counts. It includes other metrics
14 that you heard Dr. Hite refer to, such as social
15 distancing, mask wearing, mask compliance, all of
16 those things are key metrics.

17 So there is not one, you know, magic silver
18 bullet that will allow us all to go back into
19 buildings and think everything is going to be fine.
20 We know that things are going to be different for
21 quite some time. So we are looking for a safe
22 return, and we definitely want to see that happen
23 sooner rather than later. One of the recent things
24 that we really have been concerned about is
25 certainly the ventilation and the data surrounding

1 that.

2 So yeah, that's what I'll say on that. I
3 appreciate the question though.

4 REPRESENTATIVE GLEIM: Thank you for that
5 answer.

6 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Okay.

7 Representative Kail.

8 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: Thank you,
9 Mr. Chairman.

10 I asked this question earlier. I just
11 would like to ask it of this group as well. And
12 nine months ago I also asked this question. We can
13 see -- and superintendents in my area told me that
14 the effects of not having in-person learning are
15 going to be severe. And we can see it now. There's
16 studies out there that kids are really struggling in
17 a lot of senses, not all of them, but a lot of kids
18 are getting left behind.

19 At what point does the risk of not
20 educating these kids in person outweigh the risk of
21 the COVID crisis? I'm not saying the COVID crisis
22 is not a risk, it certainly is, but can we really go
23 on indefinitely, if these requirements aren't met,
24 not educating our children in person?

25 Are we really going to be allowing these

1 kids to keep falling behind?

2 we're going to have a whole generation of
3 children that didn't have in-person schooling and
4 that are going to be affected by this, if we don't
5 start doing something now -- and really, in my
6 opinion, we should have started doing some time ago.
7 So I'm curious to see, is there a point when,
8 regardless of the COVID vaccine and this, that, and
9 the other -- well, what if the COVID vaccine isn't
10 as effective as we think it is? what if the systems
11 don't get updated?

12 Are we just going to perpetually be going
13 through this and not, you know, have the in-person
14 schooling? Is there a point in time when enough is
15 enough? we're essential workers as teachers --
16 which I believe you are -- and I believe it's also
17 essential to have that in-person option. It seems
18 as though we've reached that point in my opinion,
19 but I'd like to hear what you have to say on that
20 position -- on that point.

21 MS. LINARDOPOULOS: Representative Kail, I
22 think you make a great point about how essential it
23 is. And I think you won't hear from -- there's not
24 much daylight between what Dr. Hite is saying and
25 what we're saying regarding how significant

1 in-person learning is, particularly for our tiniest
2 of learners who have -- some of them have not yet
3 been into their school building. It's really,
4 really, truly challenging. I was a kindergarten
5 teacher myself, and I cannot imagine teaching a
6 class of kindergartners virtually, but our members
7 have done really tremendous work on this. I think
8 that that is -- the concerns that you outlined and
9 the struggles that our young people are facing are
10 exactly why as soon as the shutdown commenced, all
11 of us were looking at how can we reopen school
12 buildings, what are the safety metrics, what do we
13 need to do to get people back into school buildings
14 safely?

15 And that's where teachers unions at a local
16 level and a national level have really been trying
17 to pull out all the stops from the beginning,
18 following the science. So I think that when you
19 reference, you know, enough is enough, I think that
20 we feel that and we recognize -- this is so, so hard
21 for so many people, for so many families, for so
22 many young people. And we want to be back in making
23 it work.

24 I will just close by saying our young
25 people cannot learn if they are ill or worse. Our

1 teachers cannot teach if they are ill or if they
2 lose their lives because of COVID. And that's the
3 reality of what we're dealing with. So when we're
4 talking about, you know, a risk, whether it's worth
5 the risk, I would argue that not one young person's
6 life or educator's life is worth a premature return
7 to in-person learning. With that being said, we are
8 going to make a safe -- (Inaudible).

9 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: I appreciate that
10 comment and understand. And listen, I don't
11 understand as well as you all do the needs of the
12 Philadelphia School District in particular. But
13 from a broader standpoint, you can take that logic
14 and apply it to really driving a school bus because
15 that heightens your risk of ending somebody's life
16 or injuring somebody's life or driving in the
17 school. I mean, that heightens the risk as well.

18 And the COVID crisis is a serious risk, I'm
19 not minimizing that, but I think the work that you
20 all do and your members do in person is so
21 important, it's so essential to what is being -- to
22 that kid's life and the future and the future of our
23 Commonwealth that it needs to be something that's
24 considered -- and I know that it is being
25 considered.

1 I just get -- I just think that we need to
2 keep striving and continue to look for ways to
3 reopen our schools and do it safely.

4 DR. HITE: And Representative Kail, if I
5 may add, just real briefly, what my colleague at the
6 PFT, Hillary, just stated. So this -- we're all --
7 this is all urgent for all of us. And that's why
8 we've been able to develop the vaccine program with
9 the Children's Hospital and with the Philadelphia
10 Department of Public Health. That's why we'll have
11 testing for individuals. This is urgent for all of
12 us. And so that time around urgency is now. And
13 now we just have to figure out how do we do this in
14 a manner that's safe as possible for our young
15 people and for our staff members.

16 I'll also add that for our complex need
17 students, we have five regional centers operating
18 right now. And those regional centers are serving
19 young people with -- well, they are serving families
20 that need their children to receive an assessment
21 for special education services that cannot be done
22 in person, but we have learned a lot from that. And
23 I would just, the final piece is, when we were close
24 to meeting the tenants of the agreement the first
25 time, which was right around the Thanksgiving

1 holiday, it was actually the information coming from
2 the Health Department, the State's Health
3 Commissioner, the Health Secretary that indicated
4 that our case counts had increased so significantly.
5 It just was not a good time to return to in-person
6 at that time.

7 So we were all having and looking toward
8 like a time to open back in November, and now we had
9 to -- now we've been able to do additional work, but
10 this remains urgent for all of us. And that's why
11 we are in constant communication with the Federation
12 and with other individuals to ensure that we have
13 these lawyers of safety in place.

14 REPRESENTATIVE KAIL: Thank you, Mr. Chair.
15 I have nothing further.

16 MR. STEINBERG: I'd like to weigh in here
17 now, too. Can you hear me?

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Yes.

19 MR. STEINBERG: I think there's very little
20 daylight between any of us here. And I've had a
21 little bit of an advantage because I've seen what's
22 gone on in districts across the State. And to the
23 original question, I think we're almost there.
24 We've made tremendous progress since the beginning
25 of the pandemic, so we know what steps need to be in

1 place. And we have taken them incrementally and are
2 getting close. And I can't emphasize enough that
3 being in school buildings in person is critically
4 important. We all know that, but -- and we are not
5 going to eliminate the disease. So what we have to
6 do is reduce the risk as much as we can. That way
7 everybody can be safe when they go into the
8 buildings. And a point that we haven't touched on
9 yet is like over 30 percent of our members
10 nationally have family members that are high risk.

11 So we really have to protect them to help
12 stop the community spread and prevent us from
13 getting into situations, which happened in some of
14 these other cities that opened and automatically,
15 they have to go right back to remote learning where
16 you have these targeted closings. Tremendously
17 disrespectful and disrespectful to families with
18 child-care arrangements. Very, very difficult, so I
19 think we've taken a judicious slow path and it's all
20 new and we want to make sure that everybody is safe.
21 Our most vulnerable learners can learn in person.
22 And once we get there, we can stay there.

23 Thank you.

24 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN SONNEY: Thank you.

25 You know, Philadelphia is rather

1 interesting to think about when you're not from
2 Philadelphia, right. So you know, I was fortunate
3 enough as the Chairman to bring the Committee to the
4 city, and you know, got to look at a couple of
5 schools only, you know, just to give an idea of the
6 Philadelphia School System. You know, one thing
7 that is hard for me when I think about, you know,
8 the dealings between the union and the
9 administration right now on getting these schools
10 open is the fact that, you know, other than COVID,
11 you know, what has really changed in these buildings
12 that you have been working and teaching in every day
13 for the past 20 years?

14 I realize that there are a lot of
15 improvements that do need to be made within these
16 buildings. Anybody can recognize that when they
17 take a tour through them. And it's obvious that the
18 administration, you know, has been working
19 tirelessly to get as many improvements made as
20 possible to create that feeling of safety that, you
21 know, we all want. It's not just our teachers.
22 It's our students and it's our parents. We want
23 everyone to feel safe when they go into those school
24 buildings.

25 I hope that your efforts, Mr. Hite, are

1 fruitful and that those students return very
2 quickly, especially those youngest students. We
3 would obviously, like to see all students everywhere
4 in this Commonwealth back in school. And you know.
5 We're all very hopeful that we will get there. As
6 much as we all are hoping that this fall is going to
7 bring something different, we all know that that's
8 not necessarily a truth either.

9 So I hope that we can continue to work
10 together, and we need to discuss, you know,
11 Philadelphia a little bit more here in Harrisburg.
12 Your challenges are great, and it needs to be
13 recognized. I'd really like to thank all of the
14 testifiers today. I think the information was very
15 helpful, and I'm looking forward to working together
16 with everyone, you know, to make the system better,
17 so thank you all.

18 This hearing is adjourned.

19 DR. HITE: Thank you.

20 (Whereupon, the hearing concluded
21 at 3:22 p.m.)
22
23
24
25

C E R T I F I C A T E

I hereby certify that the proceedings are contained fully and accurately in the notes taken by me from audio of the within proceedings and that this is a correct transcript of the same.

Tiffany L. Mast

Tiffany L. Mast

Court Reporter