



## **AFT Pennsylvania President Arthur Steinberg**

*Testimony | PA Senate House Education Committee | Public Hearing on challenges Pa elementary and secondary schools and students face because of COVID-19*

*Tuesday February 23, 2021 | Virtual*

Thank you, Chairman Sonney, Democratic Chair Longietti, and the Honorable members of this Committee for the invitation to testify on the difficult issues faced by Pennsylvania's schools and students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. I am proud to appear in front of this committee on behalf of our 36,000 members and 61 locals to discuss the challenges educators, students, families, and communities have overcome to teach and learn throughout this pandemic.

Make no mistake: learning has continued since school buildings were closed in March. This instruction has not always been traditional, but educators have been nothing short of heroic. In the face of so much uncertainty, our teachers stepped up for their students and their communities.

I also want to state, unequivocally that teachers want to be back in their classrooms as soon as it is deemed safe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast into stark relief the inadequacies and inequalities within our public education system.

Wealthier school districts across the Commonwealth, whose buildings are much newer and with better HVAC and ventilation systems, whose students are usually provided some sort of laptop computer, tablet, or Chromebook, and whose families are more likely to have access to high-speed broadband internet.

While in poorer districts in urban, suburban, and rural communities, students, families, and educators struggle with internet connectivity; their school buildings were unsafe before the pandemic even began due to decades of disinvestment and the presence of lead, mold, and asbestos.

Small to mid-size districts with resources have been nimble, switching almost seamlessly between in-person and remote instruction. While large districts and those without adequate resources have been forced to make the tough decisions between risking the lives and wellbeing of their students and educators and students falling

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behind academically and not having access to the wraparound services they are typically provided in school, which often includes food.

### **What needs fixing**

What has been made clear throughout the end of last school year and this school year so far is that so much of the infrastructure critical to mitigating an airborne virus, such as COVID-19, or easing the negative consequences of school buildings being closed is woefully inadequate.

Our schools' physical plant must be a priority for this legislature. Much of the reason districts continue remote learning, even when evidence has suggested that in-person learning could, in theory, be safe, is that the building mechanics required to make it safe are lacking.

Pennsylvanians need for school districts to make ongoing investments in technology, and training in that technology, for students, educators, and parents. We need to ensure that each school district has a virus mitigation plan in place so that we are never again blindsided by a pandemic. And, finally, we need ensure that broadband is readily available to all students, regardless of zip code or family income.

A 2019 report from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania found that there are no counties in Pennsylvania where at least half the population receives broadband connection.<sup>1</sup> According to this report, the Federal Communications Commission's official estimate that over 800,000 Pennsylvanians lack access to broadband connectivity is likely to be incorrectly low. Broadband speeds and access are significantly lower in rural counties in

Pennsylvania due to infrastructure and, frankly, the unwillingness of Internet Service Providers to expand into markets they deem unprofitable.

In urban areas like Philadelphia, the issue is not so much infrastructure as it is affordability. Philadelphia ranks fourth lowest among the 25 largest cities in the nation for the number of households without internet access at 16%.<sup>2</sup> And, a 2019 survey by the School District of Philadelphia found that only 45% of students in grades three through five accessed the internet from a computer at home, compared with 56% in grades six through eight, and 58% for high school students.

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A survey conducted by Pittsburgh Public Schools found that more than 1,500 of their 23,000 students have no internet. Even more households don't have enough computers or devices for each child to do schoolwork at home.<sup>3</sup>

If all goes as planned for the rollout of vaccinations, our school districts will also need to prepare for a robust summer learning program. Because of the disruption in these last two school years, students and staff will need to catch up.

And, while I recognize that this is not a budget discussion, all of these aspects of virus mitigation, of infrastructure investment, and technology cost money. I would be derelict in my duty as a public school advocate if I did not testify that the thing schools need most is money run through the fair funding formula.

## **Closing**

I will state again for the record that AFT Pennsylvania members want to be back in the classroom. We recognize the harm that social isolation can do to our students and that kids generally thrive more with in-person instruction. However, the lack of a coordinated response by our federal government to provide for universal testing, comprehensive contact tracing, adequate PPE, or even a mask mandate has resulted in the deaths of over half a million Americans. Asking teachers, students, parents, and communities to resume school as if none of this is happening is irresponsible.

And, to provide a virtual learning environment which does not cause the most vulnerable of our students to fall further behind, we need a more uniform strategy to ensure broadband connectivity for all students and educators.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and I look forward to taking any questions you may have.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband\\_Availability\\_and\\_Access\\_in\\_Rural\\_Pennsylvania\\_2019\\_Report.pdf](https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband_Availability_and_Access_in_Rural_Pennsylvania_2019_Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.inquirer.com/education/coronavirus-students-digital-divide-philadelphia-comcast-20200403.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.publicsource.org/how-the-pandemic-is-exacerbating-the-digital-divide-in-allegheny-county/>