

**PA House Appropriations and Education Committees
“Our Union Partners”**

November 17, 2023 – Yeadon, PA

J. David Henderson, Executive Director, AFSCME Council 13

Members of the Committee,

My name is David Henderson. I am proud to be Executive Director of AFSCME Council 13. We represent 65,000 public employees in Pennsylvania, including workers in our local school districts, as well as our higher education institutions.

We all know teachers do difficult jobs of educating the youth. But before the students arrive in their classrooms, it is the school bus drivers, custodians, food service workers, and support staff – AFSCME members – who students often see first when they go to school.

Our union has a deep interest in improving Pennsylvania’s education system, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our commonwealth, and for the sake of our members. Thank you for inviting AFSCME to be part of this conversation.

To improve our schools – AFSCME’s primary recommendation is this: Staff The Front Lines.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers and elected officials sang the praises and affirmed their support of

“front-line” workers. At the same time, job cuts and hiring freezes slashed the public service workforce. Today, that workforce is still hundreds of thousands of jobs short from pre-pandemic levels. States, cities, towns, and yes – school districts, are not hiring fast enough to fill the lost jobs, which is putting a strain on those everyday heroes who keep our communities running.

In response to this staffing crisis, our union started the “Staff The Front Lines” initiative so that we can be part of the solution. As part of these efforts, AFSCME launched a nationwide bus tour to raise awareness of this crisis and took steps to begin addressing it. For Council 13’s part, we hosted a listening session with Speaker Joanna McCClinton and some of our local union leaders to discuss how we can work together on this issue. We hosted a job fair at our Conference Center in Harrisburg where 100 people applied for Commonwealth jobs.

As this committee is looking for ideas, suggestions, and solutions, please look at AFSCME’s “Staff The Front Lines” efforts to see how elected officials, public employers, and labor unions, can be partners in improving recruitment and retention, including in the education sector.

Passing legislation is important, but legislators also hold a lot of power by themselves to host hiring events and resume

workshops in their districts. You have the ability to connect employers with job seekers in your districts. You have organizations like AFSCME who will eagerly partner with you to facilitate these things. Again, to improve our state's education system, you need fully staffed front lines, and we are here to help.

Once we get the folks into the jobs, we need to look at the quality of the jobs themselves and how they compare to the private sector and other industries.

On that note, I will once again urge you and your colleagues in the state legislature to pass Public Sector OSHA. I remind you of a fact that always shocks those who hear it for the first time – public employees in Pennsylvania are not covered by OSHA or any similar kind of policy, even when they are performing the same kinds of jobs as those in the private sector.

If a PennDOT crew is working on one side of a highway, and a privately contracted crew is performing the same kind of work on the other side of the same highway, the PennDOT crew is not covered by OSHA, and the private crew is covered.

This extends to our schools, as well. Our public school teachers, along with the support staff they work with, are not protected by OSHA, nor are the schools they work in. This is how we encounter issues such as mold and asbestos in our schools –

because there is no system in place to combat these problems. It goes without saying this has serious implications on students, teachers, and school staff alike, and passing public sector OSHA would put a system in place to allow us to address many of these issues. Until then, we will continue to live in a state that allows public employees – including those working in our schools – to be treated as lesser than others.

Every time we testify in favor of public sector OSHA, the opposition bemoans the potential cost of such a policy, and to them I ask: what is the dollar amount you are willing to place on a human life? I would argue the cost of not passing public sector OSHA has already been exorbitant, especially when you factor in the effects it has on our public school system.

Please work with us to get House Bill 299 and Senate Bill 93 across the finish line, so we can make things right and improve our education system in the process.

Beyond the matters of recruitment, retention, and workplace safety in our public schools, there is the glaring issue of compensation. We need consistency in wages for school employees, including teachers and other staff, in order to level the playing field. You have the power to address these issues.

We need to make sure our public sector jobs, including and especially those in our schools, are keeping pace with the private sector. According to a recent analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, state and local government workers earn approximately 10 percent to 15 percent less than comparable private sector employees.ⁱ That needs to change for Pennsylvania's public services to thrive as we all know they can.

In conclusion, for the improvement of our education system and our commonwealth as a whole, AFSCME Council 13 is calling on lawmakers to invest in workers. Invest in the employees who make our school districts happen, including teachers, support staff, custodians, bus drivers, food service providers, and crossing guards. We can do this by taking steps to improve recruitment and retention, to make schools safer through public sector OSHA, and by increasing compensation to make these jobs competitive and life-sustaining.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this vital matter.

ⁱ <https://www.epi.org/publication/public-sector-pay-gap-co-va/>