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## **Testimony to the Pennsylvania House and Senate Education Committee Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) June 7, 2016**

Good Morning, to our assembled elected officials of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Thank you to Senator Smucker, Diane McNaughton, of the Senate Education Committee and to our representatives who are present here today. And for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on this important topic of the plan for the Commonwealth in regard to the passage of Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The question we all have is; what will this mean to Pennsylvania and to our District in particular? The first thought I had was to *read* the Act. I was quickly dissuaded from that idea; the length and the fact that I am a "GLL" – "government language learner" precluded that being an effective strategy. I waited for the translation.

We now know that each state is going to have more flexibility than under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which of course leads to the next question; what will the Commonwealth do with this flexibility?

What will be held tight at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and what will be the decisions of local educators?

I have been asked to speak specifically to the treatment of focus and priority schools. Some of the flexibility is in regard the plan for improving the focus and priority schools, of which we have 16, 5 priority and 11 focus in Pittsburgh. How much does this status correlate with poverty? First, please exam the category they are in. What is the correlation with the category and poverty in the school? What are the highest poverty schools in Pennsylvania? Case studies of these schools would be a valuable support instrument.

What are the highest poverty, highest performers in Pennsylvania? For our schools in either status, there are actions in the District we take to provide more support to the neediest schools.

This support includes:

- Priority treatment by our Human Resources Department; working with the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers our neediest schools get higher consideration for staffing.
- We waive the collective bargaining agreement which requires that positions held by teachers who started late be vacated and opened for all staff to apply for. This proviso helps mitigate the teacher churn which is a hallmark of low performing schools.
- We have limited transfer to ever three years, not every year to stabilize the school. In addition to this, we do seek to find mutual matches, not force place teachers, if it is avoidable.
- We also provide additional school-based funds for our neediest schools.

In the end, teachers matter most- struggling students need teachers who love them, believe in their ability to be successful and make it their mission to make it happen. Whatever we can do to support them in this effort is the most powerful things both you and we can do.

Yes, Act 82 was important to this, but the harder part we have found out is to really grow teacher practice; just telling people where they need to improve does not get the job done.

Most are doing what they know. We need to build a superstructure on Act 82 to help teachers grow! Our district is unlike most of yours both in size and demographics, so in order to actually be supportive to *Pittsburgh* Public Schools, whatever technical support provided must be differentiated. Individuals who are sent to help, must not only be steeped in instruction but also understand the nuances of urban education and be literate regarding race and institutional racism. We have learned some hard lessons trying to turn schools around. Money is necessary, but not sufficient.

Katie Haycock of Ed Trust said that what struggling students need is not like a vaccination – one and done. It is more like good nutrition over the course of their PreK to 12 educational program. Our teachers and leaders also need time.

As I consider one of our struggling schools which in year three of the reform made amazing growth, the time it took to see growth was longer than I had thought it would. In year two when results were flat we were all discouraged. I have learned and told our principals we are winter not summer gardeners. Summer gardeners plan seeds and within a few days that first monocot or dicot pokes through the soil. This is more like planting bulbs, and knowing it will be a good long time before the first shoots push through the ground. And remember quite different from going to Home Depot and buying an already planted and blooming planter to put out on the porch. – truly instant gratification!

The other aspect of time is that in our experience, new teachers and principals seldom get the desired results in years one and two they need time. Reconstituted schools- and let's be honest many of our focus and priority schools are organically partially reconstituted annually or even *DURING* the school year, are like transplants -they need sun and water to recover.

The final aspect of the need for time is most essential. A significant expansion of time available and improved quality of professional learning is the only way teachers and leaders can improve practice in the significant ways they must improve to impact student outcomes. Evaluation without coaching and practice can move the practice some but not nearly enough.

Recent Research- *The Mirage* (2015) undertaken by The New Teacher Project (TNTP) shows the massive spend on what we call "Professional Development" is in large part a waste of teacher time and taxpayer money.

"In short we bombarded teachers with help, but most of it was not helpful-to teachers as Professionals or to schools seeking better instruction. We are not the first to say this, ...two federally funded experimental studies of sustained, content focused, job embedded professional development have found that these interventions did not result in long-lasting, significant changes in teacher practice or student outcomes." It does not have to be this way. In *Building Better teachers* by Elizabeth Green we learn a powerful teacher model.

My theory of action- I believe that our students themselves can help us learn how to better teach them through a model of reciprocal learning. What would it look like to ask them, and once I finish that lesson on polynomials, we debrief the lesson.

- What did I do that was helpful?

- What was confusing?
- Do you learn better if I repeat directions?
- If I lost you- notice not if *you* got lost, what would have helped?

Not only would I get immediate formative feedback from kids, but it may engage kids to a greater extent if they know that get to critique. It could also make them more self-reflective about their learning- a good thing for sure!

However we do it, the heart of our work is teaching and the lever to improve that is to double down on is supporting teachers in ways that improve teaching. So for PDE and District leaders the question is, "How good of teachers are we?"

Our analysis of spending on professional development by District Management Council taught us two things: First our annual spend of all in costs for PD is \$42M. Second, some of what we do is a far better investment than other things.

For example, our reading coaches provider a better return on investment than our Instructional Teacher leaders. It was not the people; it was the time they had to work with teachers which made the difference!

Like our training, the PDE training, is not seen as particularly effective either. I am referencing the required "training" principals in focus and priority schools must attend. If we can change this situation together and have a coherent comprehensive plan with actually has a record of results behind it that we that would be a great start!

Another tough lesson is execution of the plan is everything, work-streams, assigned to people with timelines are time consuming to develop, but are essential. NCLB tried punishment- close the school, reconstitute that has not gotten the job done.

Nothing substitutes for great teaching. Internal services of others such as social workers, counselors and outside support from community groups can help. Support for children in challenging home situations and communities is essential.

So how does what I have said here today apply to our most recent partnership with Wilkinsburg School District to receive their 7 – 12 grade students during the first year at Westinghouse High 6-12? I'll highlight a few specific actions. First, at Westinghouse we have the staffing agreements in place that I talked about at the beginning of my testimony. Second, we have the resources necessary to support the students funds are being used to support students' social emotional needs; we are able to secure additional social workers and counselors to work with students and families. In addition, we have assessed the Special Education needs of all of the students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which is slightly over a third of the student population that we will be educating. We are also developing a coherent plan with PDE to support the teachers' professional practice that works on growth mindsets, but also an academic plan that is based on what the students know and how we differentiate as well as how we move them to proficiency. Finally, we have an oversight committee that consists of board members from both school districts, key central office staff and representative from the state legislature.

When I speak to our principals- "more mental health support for our students" is their ask from us. Monitoring can help but needs to be more formative and less summative. Our staff on the ground told me that we seem to do a lot of redundant paperwork in the name of accountability, but not in the name of improvement. In addition it would be more beneficial to be accountable to one person not multiple people.

So to summarize:

Work of well qualified staff who are well versed in instruction of children of color, ELL, and children whose families are in poverty working directly with teachers in focus and priority schools can move this.

This includes sufficient clock time for learning for teachers and calendar time to show growth, we have to wait for spring! And please put the focus on growth rather than achievement measures.

For low performance schools growth is the only legitimate way to get there. Growing teachers' practice- what really this helping teachers grow their OWN practice essential for them to reach performance goals.