

Testimony to Joint Education Committee

June 7, 2016

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Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Smucker, Chairman Dinniman and members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to discuss school turnaround this morning. How to address our most persistently struggling schools is not only a critical part of the federal ESSA legislation, it's critical to the future of the Commonwealth.

My name is Mike Wang and I am executive director of the Philadelphia School Advocacy Partners. We are a nonprofit organization that works statewide to help create the policy conditions for great schools to thrive. Our sister organization, the Philadelphia School Partnership, has philanthropically invested over \$50 million in dozens of schools of all types serving low-income students in Philadelphia, including traditional district, public charter and nonpublic schools. A large share of our school investments have been in school turnarounds including in each of those three sectors and as such, we've developed a perspective on what works and doesn't with respect to turnaround as well as what policy conditions are needed to spur successful turnarounds.

It's been said often that we have an education crisis in Pennsylvania, and indeed we do. But it doesn't affect schools and districts uniformly: the crisis is that we have two school systems in Pennsylvania, one that is working for families and one – much smaller – composed of schools that fail to prepare students for success in life. This hurts both children and taxpayers. According to a report our organization released in 2014, we spent \$1.6 billion in taxpayer dollars to educate the over 90,000 students attending Pennsylvania's worst 5% of schools, yet only 28% of those students passed the state math exam.

In Pennsylvania's worst 5% of high schools students are nearly ten times more likely to drop out than to pass the state math exam.ⁱ Overall, nearly half of students in those schools drop out—costing taxpayers an estimated \$5.8 billion in lost economic productivity and expanded social welfareⁱⁱ According to a Stanford study, persistently underperforming schools cost Pennsylvania an estimated \$153 million each year on remedial education for college students.ⁱⁱⁱ

These financial costs pale in comparison to the social and opportunity costs persistently failing schools pose to Pennsylvania's most vulnerable families. For children already burdened with countless challenges; a great education is essential to achieve success in life. Yet year after year, thousands are trapped in schools that we all know are falling short.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Demography does not have to equal educational destiny. We recently used the 2013-2014 School Performance Profile (SPP) – the state's report card – to examine schools that enroll at least 80% economically disadvantaged students and are scoring 70 or above on the state rating, meaning that they are meeting the state's definition of "on track" despite their demographics. We found examples of both traditional district and charter schools that are proving it is possible to get door-busting results with the most difficult-to-educate students. Though it is incredibly difficult, it is clear that with the right conditions in place every child—regardless of their background—can achieve at high levels.

This poses an important question to policymakers that gets at the heart of ESSA's turnaround provisions: if we can give some of our most vulnerable families schools that meet their needs, don't we have a moral obligation to do that for all families?

ESSA gives us an opportunity to make good on that moral question. Under the law states are required to identify, encourage districts to intervene in, monitor progress on, and ultimately take action themselves on schools in need of dramatic improvement.

But there is a lot of discretion in ESSA on how to approach the problem. That leaves a second important question for this body and for the Pennsylvania Department of Education: are we striving to simply comply with the minimum requirement of the law, or are we aiming to dramatically change the educational outcomes for our most vulnerable students?

This question is critical because under the very broad umbrella of "turnaround" we have seen radically different results to date. Arguably, the most significant school turnaround effort in Pennsylvania to date is the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. SIG provided funding for four different types of school turnaround initiatives. The largest of these, called "Transformation," requires reforms like teacher and principal evaluations and additional training and professional development. It stops short of more radical changes that are shown to make a difference.

From 2010-2014 the federal government invested over \$57 million in 25 Pennsylvania schools to implement this program. In those 25 schools:

- Math proficiency increased by just .01%
- Reading proficiency *decreased* by .40%
- Only 7 schools saw gains in both math and reading
- 8 schools had *decreases* of more than 10 percentage points in either math or reading

Compare that with Philadelphia's much more aggressive Renaissance schools program. In the 2010-11 school year, the School District of Philadelphia transferred seven of its worst schools to proven charter school operators and over the next two years, while overall district proficiency decreased:

- All seven schools went up at least 9 percentage points in reading proficiency.
- Six of seven schools went up at least 10 percentage points in math proficiency.

Among the most mature Renaissance schools, student outcomes are approaching results that look like the wealthier suburbs surrounding the city.

And while not every Renaissance school has been successful – school turnaround is extremely difficult – the message is clear: to really change outcomes for children, "turnaround" has to be bold, be comprehensive, and fundamentally shift how a school is run. You can't nibble at the edges and expect radically different results.

Here in Pennsylvania, we've already embarked on a path towards bold school turnaround. Many of the tenets of school turnaround included in ESSA exist within Senate Bill 6, which passed the Senate chamber last June and is awaiting consideration in the House.

Like ESSA, SB 6 would require the state to identify the bottom 5% of schools using the School Performance Profile, an accountability system that factors in multiple measures, including static achievement on tests, student growth over time, graduation rates and more. And like ESSA, SB 6 requires that schools improve

within a designated time frame or take dramatic steps to improve that could include replacing the principal and 50% of the professional staff, contracting with outside providers, converting the school to a charter school and affording students trapped in persistently struggling schools other higher-performing options.

Some have argued we should take charter schools out of any discussions about school turnaround strategies. While chartering is not the only solution, policymakers would severely constrain the ability to impact change in the name of politics were we to exclude charter schools as one tactic in school turnaround.

According to a 2015 study from the CREDO Center at Stanford, urban charter schools in Philadelphia on average achieve significantly greater student success in both math and reading than their traditional public school counterparts. Notably, minority students and students in poverty saw some of the largest benefits.

In Philadelphia charter schools:

- Black students in poverty receive the equivalent of an additional 50 days of reading and 43 days of math instruction compared with their traditional public school counterparts
- Hispanic students in poverty receive the equivalent of an additional 21 days of reading and 43 days of math instruction compared with their traditional public school counterparts
- English Language Learners receive the equivalent of an additional 35 days of reading and 72 days of math instruction compared with their traditional public school counterparts

Why is this the case? Charters have the autonomy to tailor their structure, curriculum, and instructional model to the unique needs of their communities—flexibility that is critical for educating our most vulnerable students. It's only natural in districts around the state to tailor labor contracts and district rules to the typical school within a district; but, to serve our neediest students well requires interventions that are anything but typical. If we care about outcomes for Black and Hispanic low-income students, charters must be part of the solution.

Importantly, SB 6 ultimately shifts our focus away from pitting charter schools against district schools to approaching the problem through the lens of schools that are delivering results for families vs. those that aren't. *All* chronically underperforming public schools—whether district or charter—would face intervention and charter schools would face expeditious closure under its meaningful accountability provisions.

In short, ESSA can be a catalyst for Pennsylvania to give tens of thousands of our children a shot at a better life through improving our persistently struggling schools. But policymakers have to make that choice—merely doing the bare minimum required by law won't be enough. To both give families the quality education they deserve and ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely, we must address the problems facing our most persistently struggling schools today in a bold and transformative way. Nibbling around the edges – especially in the face of a legislative vehicle that can address our challenges – will fail yet another generation of our most vulnerable children

Thanks for your attention to this work.

ⁱ“Pennsylvania School Performance Profile” <http://paschoolperformance.org/Search>

ⁱⁱ “The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School” http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ “State Costs for College Remediation” <http://collegepuzzle.stanford.edu/?p=1635>