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# WILLIAM PENN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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*Innovation. Opportunity. Success.*

## **Education Tour Testimony**

### **Pennsylvania House Appropriations and Education Committees**

Submitted by Dr. Eric J. Becoats, Superintendent of the William Penn School District  
November 17, 2023

Welcome to the William Penn School District and to the Penn Wood Ninth Grade Academy. I am Superintendent Dr. Eric J. Becoats, and I am very excited to host Chairman Harris, Chairman Schweyer, the Appropriations and Education Committees, and all of our guests and speakers on the last stop of your Education Tour. Thank you for inviting me to participate on this panel, “Supporting Public Schools”.

When we hosted the first stop of your tour on September 11th in our Penn Wood High School gymnasium, I know that many of you were struck by the words painted on the gym floor: “Do More With Less.”

We have been doing more with less long before the lawsuit was brought to the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court in 2014 and in the ten years since then. When I joined the district in 2020, I quickly embraced the fight for fair funding, advocating for what is right and for what our students, teachers, staff, families, and communities deserve. We have worked diligently in our district and with our local, state, and national legislators, to make it known that the way that our schools are funded has been unfair and must change.

This is not a William Penn School District issue. All school districts throughout the Commonwealth have been affected by unconstitutional practices. After the February 2023 decision by the Commonwealth Court that agreed, we are all eagerly awaiting the next steps by the Basic Education Fund Commission to right decades of wrong-doing and to ensure that all schools in the state of Pennsylvania are fully funded. Doing More With Less is no longer an acceptable solution for our children.

As policies and plans are drawn up to create a constitutional funding system for Pennsylvania’s schools, I ask you to ensure that the following four areas are funded for the sake of our students.

1. Fully fund special education services for all students who require them.

All districts need to ensure that they have the funds to support all of their special education students. This can be achieved by following the guidance provided by experts who lay out

exactly what is needed to fund each student or to develop a funding formula that ensures that these needs are met. Special education is not an area that can be shortchanged. It is imperative that districts have what they need. In our district alone, 20% of our students require this special education services.

2. Fully fund support services to address mental health needs.

Each school throughout the Commonwealth should have a social worker, guidance counselor, academic interventionists for math, ELA, and science, and behavioral support personnel. It is imperative that we have the resources to give our students the support they need when it comes to their mental and emotional health.

As we try to have our students meet the state assessment requirements, our students must have fully-staffed schools where every student can get the support and assistance they need to do their best.

3. Fully fund competitive salaries for teachers.

It is imperative that teachers' salaries are competitive to attract and retain the best teachers in all of our schools. With a teacher shortage that leaves schools competing over a limited resource, it is more important than ever that we compensate our hard-working and dedicated teachers with the salaries they deserve. This ties back to state assessments and the education and supports we are providing to our students so they can learn and perform at their best. Having a teacher in every classroom on the first day of school is not too much to ask.

4. Fully fund school districts' operating and capital budgets.

It is very clear that our current budget system does not support all of our needs. We can no longer mix operating and capital budgets. We need to run our schools, but we also need funds dedicated to maintaining and improving our existing infrastructure.

Just as we take care of our houses and living accommodations, there are things we must do on an annual basis to take care of our school buildings and facilities. We must invest in these community assets, ensuring that they are safe and clean for the present as well as operational for the future. Preventative maintenance procedures must be in place, and school districts must have the funds to address these ongoing needs. It is not fair when schools are crumbling in disrepair in our Commonwealth, while others are already equipped for the 21st century. All schools must be brought up to this level.

In sum, and what I hope that I shared here, is that Fair Funding does not equate to money that would be nice to have. It is about what is essential. William Penn is not alone in having school buildings that were built nearly a century ago. These buildings are outdated and expensive to repair. In a fall 20221 audit, it was found that 9 of our 11 schools are in poor condition, requiring immediate action. Improvements at those buildings are estimated at approximately \$150 million.

We are in the midst of our Ten-Year Facilities Master Plan, and last night we gathered here at the Ninth Grade Academy to launch a Community Capital Campaign. Through grants we have been able to make some needed improvements, but we are forced to reach out to our community to be able to make more. These are NOT extras - these are the basics.

We desperately need the Basic Education Fund Commission to fund our district and districts across the Commonwealth to be able to improve facilities. Students in Pennsylvania deserve 21st century classrooms equipped with working HVAC systems and are free from asbestos and other hazards.

Before I close, I also want to remind everyone of the importance of ensuring that the annual Pennsylvania is signed on time and that it is ready to go on July 1st. The delay, such as happened this fiscal year, has a ripple effect and negatively affects our schools, staff, and students - not to mention the detrimental effect it has on families, businesses, organizations, hospitals, and universities across the state. I implore you to remember how important it is to ensure this every year and how having an on-time budget is an integral part of fair funding.

I eagerly await the findings and plan put forth by the Basic Education Fund Commission. I want them to know that with all of the work that was put into the Fair Funding lawsuit, our students cannot - and will not - be short changed again.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I feel privileged to be a part of this work. On behalf of the William Penn School District community, it is an honor to host you. Thank you.