



Abington Heights School District

200 East Grove Street, Clarks Summit, PA 18411 Phone: (570) 586-2511

November 1, 2023

Good afternoon Chairmen Harris, Grove, and Schweyer:

On behalf of the Abington Heights School District, it is an honor and privilege to address the Education and Appropriations Committees at today's joint hearing. I would also like to recognize and thank my professional colleagues, Dr. Costello, Dr. Curry, and Mr. Sheehan, for their unwavering support and dedication to public education.

My name is Chris Shaffer and I am the proud Superintendent of the Abington Heights School District in Lackawanna County. Our district serves approximately 3,450 students across six school buildings with a staff of 350 professionals. We are a district with high expectations and a long-standing tradition of academic, professional, and extracurricular excellence. Abington Heights High School was recently ranked #34 out of over 800 Pennsylvania High Schools by the U.S. News and World Report and National Student Clearinghouse data indicate our first-year college matriculation, second year college persistence, and six-year graduation rates exceed, by far, national and PA averages. In addition, our PA Future Ready Index scores continue to reflect our expectations of excellence and lasered-focus on our students.

Despite superlative outcomes, our financial challenges are formidable, due in part to escalating and seemingly unfair charter school reimbursement rates, increases in special education expenditures outpacing subsidies, and the lack of funding for facilities projects. The aforementioned challenges are not new; however, I would like to share some evidence from Abington Heights to help illustrate the burden we are facing. Over the last decade, our special education enrollment has increased by 43%, a phenomenon that is neither unique to PA nor our nation as a whole. While the increase is substantial, we still are below the PA average and struggling to close the gap between our expenses and PA special education subsidies. In fact, over the past decade our special education subsidy has increased by 15% with special education tuition costs increasing by 827% and special education expenditures increasing by over \$800,000 within a two year window of time (2020-2022). Further exacerbating the challenge is the increasing charter tuition rates (reimbursements) we pay to providers who serve our regular and special education students at a cost beneath the reimbursement we are paying all while showing outcomes that are consistently and alarmingly low. I am an advocate for public education, including charter schools; however, if competitive options are to exist, then the regulations, funding mechanisms, and accountability standards should be the same.

The municipalities representing Abington Heights School District have been providing an excellent education to all of our students for over 193 years. Let there be no doubt, we firmly believe education is a pillar of democracy and a community mandate. We have evolved in the manner by which our education is delivered and measured over the past 193 years and are

dedicated to providing our students with the materials, resources, and facilities that are consistent with high expectations. Unfortunately, the cost of maintaining and renovating our facilities has increased and the subsidies from the state have been discontinued. To better illustrate this impact, I will share some recent data. We are currently undergoing a facility study to improve our aging buildings, specifically, the need to build or significantly renovate our middle school. Three years ago the cost of a new building was \$232 per square foot and today that figure is approximately \$400 per square foot. A new middle school will be close to 160,000 square feet, meaning the cost of building new has increased by over 46% over three years and this does not include the high interest rates (above 5%) we are currently facing. The last time our community engaged in a building project, Pennsylvania's PLANCON program was in place and provided a subsidy ranging from 10-20% of the building costs. Without PLANCON, Abington Heights School District and community are left to make up this difference along with the increased cost of building.

Without adjustments to charter reimbursements, special education, and facilities subsidies, the Abington Heights School District community is left with one option, to close the funding gap ourselves through tax increases. This is not a tenable solution for our community and the long-term health of our educational system as a whole in Pennsylvania. I implore you to advocate with your colleagues to adjust these inequities in order to provide our schools with the resources we need to be successful and safe.

Regards,

Christopher L. Shaffer, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Abington Heights School District



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