



MID VALLEY

SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Testimony to the PA House Appropriations and Education Committees

Good afternoon Representatives Harris, Nelson and Nelson. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this hearing of the joint Appropriations and Education Committees. I would also like to thank my colleagues and the representatives not only here today but to all serving in office as your commitment to the betterment of the students of the commonwealth is appreciated.

As I said, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I would like to emphasize the word opportunity. I believe we are all here because of opportunities that were presented to us at some point in our lives and the opportunities we wish to provide others in the future.

My Name is Patrick Sheehan. I have been the Superintendent of the Mid Valley School District for the past 8 years. I have been an educator for 24 years. I come from a traditional middle class family of modest means. My father worked as a machinist for 35 years, my mother flipped back and forth between stay at home mom and a working mom. They put three boys through college and gave us all that they could. How they did it, to this day, I still can't tell you, but they did.

We have had our share of tough times, as any of us can say. But I want to keep coming back to that word, opportunity. I was provided an opportunity to do something I loved. My education and career was not handed to me. I had to work hard to get there. But I did have the opportunity.

My testimony today furthers that theme of opportunity. At our school district, the Mid Valley School District in Lackawanna County, we're comprised of people with similar histories to mine. Hard working, family and community oriented people who are proud of their towns and their schools. They have been through, and many are currently going through, difficult times. Our district has experienced enrollment growth and an increase of diverse student populations such as special needs, English learners and economic disadvantages.

As a public school district, we not only acknowledge this but we embrace it. We have made a commitment to continue to provide as many opportunities as feasibly possible so that all of our students can put themselves on a path to success and happiness. Our message has been that if your child wants to attend an Ivy League school; the opportunity is here. If your child wants to pursue their passion for art, music or drama; the opportunity is here. If your child wants to earn an associate degree while in high school to work in and eventually take over the family business; the opportunity is here. If your child wants to play a division I sport on a full scholarship; the opportunity is here. If your child needs skills to be successful in the workforce; the opportunity is here. I can go on and on.

While we are committed to providing these opportunities, we are growing frustrated with how we will be able to continue to provide them. District taxpayers already, and unfairly, carry the vast majority of this burden. We are currently undergoing a county-wide reassessment for the first time in over 50 years. We are hopeful the process will be fair but there are many unknowns regarding what fiscal outcomes we can expect. Our district, as well as others in Lackawanna County, has also experienced a decrease in assessed property values due to assessment appeals; especially commercial properties. When planning the future of public education, the General Assembly must be aware of these realities.

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According to data provided and sourced by the PA Schools Work coalition, The Mid Valley School District is underfunded by the state approximately nine million dollars annually. With a 35 million dollar district budget, and growing; that is beyond significant. It could even be life changing.

Mid Valley is one of the 100 lowest state funded districts in Pennsylvania, as evidenced by our inclusion in the "Level Up" funding initiative. Mid Valley ranks 469 out of 500 districts in per student spending. What does this data tell us? It tells us that we are doing what we can to be good stewards of taxpayer money while still providing robust opportunities. It also sheds light on the inequities within the public education system.

As we continue to deal with this annual funding shortfall, we have tried to critically think of alternate ways to make all of this happen. What I mean by that is, we have worked to continue moving the district forward through a variety of methods including: creatively combining positions, restructuring staff, partnering with community providers, engaging with corporate entities for sponsorships, seeking assistance from educational foundations, and regularly applying for grant funding. And, yes, we've raised property taxes.

Our district has built a fund balance above the recommended 8% of expenditures after realizing a negative fund balance in 2016. This work has not been easy. Difficult decisions had to be made. Certain repairs and facility upkeep had to be put on hold, maintaining staff and appropriate teacher-student ratios has proved challenging, paying our professionals and support staff fair and decent wages was a struggle.

Through careful planning and with the shared commitment of our Board of Education and the support and input of our wonderful faculty, staff and community, we have been able to:

- upgrade curriculum and academic materials,
- address pressing facility needs,
- expand STEM offerings,
- provide additional services for our neediest of students,
- offer greater dual enrollment options,
- increase our career and technical education enrollment through the Career Technology Center of Lackawanna County,
- enhance student and staff technology,
- started our own cyber school option,
- settle contracts,
- greatly increase school security

I am worried, however, that without real and immediate funding reform, the next several years will be fiscally dangerous in our district. The teacher and staff shortage, rising Special Education costs, inequitable funding of cyber charter schools, unfunded mandates, inflation and lower property assessments will all continue to have a negative fiscal impact on us, and many many others.

We have conscientiously expended the much needed and appreciated ESSER funding. Our focus has been on academic recovery, student and staff mental health and safety. Even though the effects and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be with us, and our students, for quite some time, we've had to take on expenditures that are non-recurring as the termed "ESSER fiscal cliff" would soon be here.

We need to be able to continue these activities and services beyond this fiscal cliff. There is still a tremendous amount of work that we need to accomplish. Our students will need these academic, social, emotional and mental health services far beyond the ESSER deadlines. We do not wish to be

back in the situation of deciding what is most important and for whom. All of our students need our very best, every day and they deserve the myriad of opportunities that we wish to provide.

I realize that this task of public school funding reform is daunting for you and there are always unintended consequences to consider. I firmly believe that a workable solution exists to address these inequities that will not harm my colleagues nor our neighbors.

The growth of public education is essential for our commonwealth's future prosperity. Now more than ever we, as educators, need to step up and provide our students with the skills, knowledge and, most importantly, opportunity to navigate us through the unknown years ahead. I respectfully urge you and the general assembly to step up with us, and take advantage of the opportunity in front of you to fairly fund public education.

Thank you again for your time today.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Patrick J. Sheehan", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Patrick J. Sheehan, Superintendent