



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Honorable Stan Saylor
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Harrisburg, PA 17120-2004

The Honorable Matt Bradford
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**Questions and Requests from
2022-23 PDE House Appropriations Committee Hearing**

Dear Chairmen Saylor and Bradford:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee to discuss Governor Tom Wolf's proposed 2022-23 state budget for the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). As requested, below are responses and follow up information relative to several outstanding questions raised by you and your members that we invite you to share with them.

1. Chairman Saylor asked about a letter on December 10 regarding the status of federal relief funds to be used for non-public schools under Act 121.
 - a. The Department provided a formal, written response on March 16 (pdf copy attached).
2. Representative James requested some clarification on the proposed \$6 million increase to Career and Technical Education and asked how the \$105 million would be distributed within current programs and PAsmart. He also asked how the Department measures success in this area.
 - a. In response PDE has collected the following additional information, including:

PAsmart Advancing Grant Application and Scoring Criteria:

The [Request for Applications \(RFA\) for the 2020-21 PAsmart Advancing Computer Science and STEM Education Grant Program](#) is available on the PDE website. Applications are due March 21, 2022. PAsmart is a competitive grant program based on principles and priorities developed and approved by the PA Workforce Development Board. See pg. 5 of the RFA. Application scoring criteria are found on pages 9-11. More detail was provided to assist applicants in a live webinar held on Monday, February 28, and the recording is accessible through education.pa.gov/PAsmart.

PAsmart Grant Outcomes and Program Assessment:

PDE requires programmatic impact and fiscal reports from each grant recipient at the close of the grant period. These reports include evaluations of the project-specific goals, and when possible, report generalizable outcomes such as number of schools, students, and educators impacted.

PDE also conducted mid-grant-period outreach to survey Advancing Grant recipients about their progress made to date, the barriers they have encountered, and the supports they need in the latter half of the period in order to achieve their programmatic goals. The mid-grant-period survey data and the final impact reports, in addition to periodic informal convenings of grantees welcoming feedback on the program, were used by PDE to make changes to the grant guidelines and supports provided to the second round of grantees.

In addition, PDE has contracted with an education research firm to conduct an independent evaluation of the PAsmart STEM/CS initiative across the 2018-19 and 2019-20 cohorts, as well as the 2020-21 Targeted Grant cohort. The evaluation focuses on the impact of PAsmart Targeted Grants on the expansion and diversification of students and teachers in computer science courses in public schools. Findings are expected later this spring.

3. Representative Schmitt requested an update on the school bus driver shortage and, to the extent possible, information on efforts to address it.
 - a. The pupil transportation formula is complex and includes many factors, including costs school districts pay to transportation contractors. We anticipate that LEAs experiencing increased costs as a result of bus driver shortages will have those costs reflected in the pupil transportation formula; however, there are many factors beyond costs of drivers that define the pupil transportation subsidy. Additionally, the pupil transportation data that drives the 2022-23 subsidy (from the 2021-22 fiscal year) will be reported by LEAs in the fall of 2022. We are happy to provide any follow up regarding any issues or concerns we see with the data at that time.

In addition, the Advisory Committee formed under House Resolution 15 (HR15) to address the school bus driver shortage is considering several recommendations listed below. The findings and recommendations will be shared with the House Education and Transportation Committees later this year.

- Create an alternative CDL for school bus drivers that exempts drivers from training on the mechanics associated with other commercial vehicle requirements.
- Create a one-point clearinghouse to expedite background checks.
- Eliminate the 10-mile radius relative to the non-public school's transportation requirement.
- Increase the number of students riding in vans.
- Increase the number of minibuses used by schools, since operating those vehicles does not require a CDL.

In October 2021, the Secretary sent letters to 375,000 CDL license holders to ascertain their individual interest in securing employment. Individuals then used an online survey to express interest and be connected with local school districts through the regional Intermediate Unit (IU). A total of 1,349 individuals responded to the survey. Of those, 1,269 had a CDL license; 605 had a passenger endorsement; and 224 had the school bus endorsement. All 29 IUs received survey submissions. The survey link remains active, and the Department continues to receive sporadic inquiries. The Department welcomes the opportunity to continue sharing these job opportunities across the Commonwealth.

As part of the HR15 research process, the Joint State Government Commission worked with the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials (PASBO) to survey their members about the school bus driver shortage. Eighty four percent of school transportation directors responded to the question “Are you currently fully staffed?” Eighty-three percent of the transportation directors said that they were not fully staffed while 17 percent of the respondents said that they were fully staffed.

School transportation directors were asked how many drivers they have right now and how many they would have if they were fully staffed. Those responses were combined to provide a picture of how close to fully staffed school transportation directors perceive themselves to be. Responses ranged from 61 percent to 107 percent. On average, responding LEAs are staffed at 88 percent of what they consider to be a full complement of bus drivers.

The Joint State Government Commission also worked with the Pennsylvania School Bus Association (PSBA) to survey contractors regarding the bus driver shortage. Contractors were asked how many drivers they would need to be considered fully staffed and how many they currently had to determine a percentage of current staffing levels for those respondents. Fifty-one contractors responded to this question. The lowest response given was 15 percent and the highest was 125, meaning this contractor had more drivers than necessary. The average contractor was staffed at 81 percent of full capacity.

Please note that this is self-reported data with responses from a portion of the 500 school districts and school bus contractors.

4. Representative Rothman asked if PDE knew whether local schools lost revenue over the last year, and if the department is monitoring how federal covid relief funds were spent by schools.
 - a. Based on total local revenue from school districts’ 2019-20 Annual Financial Reports (AFR), some school districts experienced declines in local revenue, while others experienced increases. While much of the 2019-20 fiscal year was not impacted by COVID, the shut down during the last quarter of the fiscal year resulted in approximately 140 school districts experiencing a decline in total local revenue in 2019-20 compared to 2018-19. The Department can provide more information about school district local revenue changes when 2020-21 AFR information is finalized in April.
 - b. Yes. PDE is monitoring how federal ESSER funds are being used. ESSER funds are only awarded to LEAs after LEAs complete a robust application (for each ESSER component) outlining their planned use of the funds, how the eligible use will assist the LEA prevent, prepare for, or respond to COVID and impact students, and how the LEA will comply with all federal requirements. Once the application is reviewed and approved by PDE, the funds can begin to flow; however, the ESSER funds function as a reimbursement program, so LEAs must submit quarterly financial reports outlining their expenditures to receive ESSER funds. Additionally, there is significant federal reporting that is required for all ESSER funds, as well as ongoing monitoring of the use of these funds on an annual basis. LEAs are also subject to local, state, and federal audits and reviews regarding the use of their funds.
5. Representative Mako asked whether information on outcome measures in adult migrant education were available.

- a. PDE is subject to a robust federal reporting system, which requires an annual evaluation of the Migrant Education Program (MEP) be conducted by an external organization. One of the metrics for evaluation is whether and to what extent PA-MEP programs are impacting student outcomes. These reports and additional information are available on the [PA Migrant Education Program Evaluation](#) section of PDE's website.
6. Representative Heffley asked for an explanation of the \$7 million Empowerment Fund via the proposed "Transfer to Empowerment" line item intended to assist schools in financial recovery. He requested specifically to know if ESSER funds could be used to address toxic materials in schools, and if PDE would work with schools to utilize funding for this purpose.
 - a. Approximately \$5 million of Empowerment funds have been spent in 2021-22; however, the Department anticipates additional expenditures as we near the end of the fiscal year. Empowerment funds cover payments to Chief Recovery Officers and Receivers, as well as technical assistance for school districts in Financial Watch and Financial Recovery.
 - b. The amount transferred into the Empowerment Fund every year is legislated in Public School Code from undistributed funds not expended, encumbered or committed from appropriations for grants, subsidies and assessments made to the Department. Currently, that amount is set at \$7 million. This annual transfer is dependent on availability of available prior-year funding in the Department. A General Fund appropriation provides additional certainty that these funds will be available annually. In many cases, ESSER funds can be used to address school facility health and safety issues, where there is a clear connection to COVID, and the eligible expenditure assists the LEA prevent, prepare for, or respond to COVID. Many LEAs are using ESSER funds to conduct renovation and other facility-related projects, and PDE has provided significant guidance on this issue, including a renovation/construction-specific webinar and follow-up sessions that provide LEAs with guidance on using ESSER funds for these purposes, and we have offered weekly newsletters and weekly office hours to assist LEAs in developing plans for use of their ESSER funds.
7. Representative Kinkead asked for additional information related to whether PDE accounts for the number of change orders vendors submit in the course of fulfilling their assigned duties when considering new or additional contracts with these vendors.
 - a. PDE has multiple layers of oversight to ensure compliance with and completion of vendor contracted services. While data on change orders specifically is not available until April, the department will follow up with the representative directly to provide the relevant information.
8. Representative Zimmerman asked how much Governor Wolf's 5 day paid leave policy for vaccinated employees cost PDE, and for an explanation of estimated overtime cost increases over time.
 - a. Eligible Commonwealth employees have until March 31, 2022 to use some or all of their five days of vaccine-related leave. PDE had nearly 380 employees participate in the program. The Department will have the anticipated employee payout in early April. The payout to employees will be made from existing Department GGO funds.

- b. The overtime estimate was based on a budgeted 2021-22 number from the Performance Based Budget Report. That number included many items and was simply a budgeted estimate given many unknowns at the start of the year, including the fact that there was significant additional workload at the Department to process incoming federal funding. The actual overtime cost anticipated for 2021-22 is expected to be significantly lower than budgeted.

- 9. Representative Wheeland asked for additional information on whether PDE has realized any cost savings from remote work policies.
 - a. A review is still underway, but the department will provide documentation of any cost savings to the representative directly.

- 10. Representative Heffley asked about the temporary nurse aide program, specifically some recent complaints pertaining to lack of accessible testing locations and unresponsiveness by the assessment provider.
 - a. The Department of Human Services holds the contract with the assessment provider, Credentia, to provide the certified nurse aide exam. However, since PDE and the Department of Health also administer programs related to nurse aides, all three departments, and representatives from the Governor's Policy Office met with Credentia on March 15 regarding industry concerns and opportunities to improve access to testing locations. On March 16, PDE, DHS, DOH, Governor's Policy Office, Credentia, and industry representatives met to discuss their concerns in detail and plan additional testing opportunities.

 - b. Under Act 138 of 2020, nearly 1,000 temporary nurse aides (TNAs) have received approval from PDE to take the certified nurse aide exam. Eligible TNAs have four months after the end of the federal pandemic emergency declaration to take the CNA exam, which is required for placement on the PA Nurse Aide Registry. The federal emergency declaration is in effect through April 16, 2022, unless extended for another 90 days by the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.

In closing, we thank you again for the opportunity to appear before your esteemed committee and answer questions and look forward to our continued partnership in ensuring the best educational outcomes for Pennsylvania's students.

Sincerely,



Noe Ortega, Ph.D.
Secretary of Education