



Pennsylvania
Department of Education

Testimony

presented to the

House Appropriations Committee

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2025-2026 House Appropriations Hearing Testimony

Good morning, Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and distinguished members of the House Appropriations Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to join you today to discuss Governor Shapiro's 2025-26 budget proposal for the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). I am Dr. Carrie Rowe, and I have the honor and privilege to serve as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Acting Secretary of Education. With me today are my colleagues:

- Shante' Brown, Deputy Secretary of Child Development and Early Learning;
- Lynette Kuhn, Deputy Secretary of Postsecondary and Higher Education; and
- Jessica Sites, Director of the Bureau of Financial Operations.

By investing in our students, we invest in the future of the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania's learners deserve a world-class education that equips them with the resources they need to be successful in tomorrow's economy. Governor Shapiro's 2025-2026 proposed budget affirms and continues the progress made last year to create an education system that ensures students from every county have the opportunity to succeed. This year's proposed budget empowers education leaders to fulfill our unified goal to prepare all students that graduate high school to be informed and effective citizens that are college and career ready.

Investments in Basic Education

The 2025-2026 budget proposal aims to expand upon the historic investments made in the 2024-2025 budget by continuing to invest in the Commonwealth's schools to ensure they have the necessary resources to provide Pennsylvania students with a high-quality education that gives them the freedom to chart their own course and the opportunity to succeed. Governor Shapiro's proposed K-12 budget includes:

- \$526 million increase to the Ready to Learn Adequacy and Tax Equity Supplements to continue the bipartisan investments that were agreed upon last year, and
- \$75 million increase to Basic Education Funding to continue to expand on the contributions made to the newly updated Basic Education Funding Formula.

Funding Special Education

The proposed budget includes a \$40 million increase in special education funding. School districts are required to provide special education services to all eligible students, and with the rising costs of these programs, it is essential that school districts have the resources to ensure that students with disabilities and special needs have the supports they need.

Career and Technical Education

This budget proposal creates more opportunity for our students by increasing support for career and technical education programs. The 2025-2026 proposed budget includes a \$5.5 million increase to Career and Technical Education (CTE) funding for students to attend one of Pennsylvania's nearly 2,000 approved CTE programs that launch learners into careers. Career and Technical Education prepares students to participate in our economy, fuels the Commonwealth's workforce, and encourages businesses to come and stay in Pennsylvania.

Safe and Healthy Learners

The number one priority of the Pennsylvania Department of Education is to ensure that our students are learning in an environment where they feel safe and healthy, which is why this budget includes:

- \$10.8 million increase to School Food Services to continue the **Universal Free Breakfast program** and to support continued state reimbursements for all breakfast and reduced cost lunches. Students cannot be expected to learn on an empty stomach, which is why the Department continues to invest in their nutritional needs. Over 90 million breakfast meals were served last school year, an increase of 10 million meals from the previous year.
- \$3 million to maintain the **Menstrual Hygiene Product Grant** to ensure that students do not miss instruction time due to not having access to these essential health care products. This program allows the Pennsylvania Department of Health to provide schools with funding for both products and dispensers to ensure these products are available at no cost to students who need them.
- \$25 million increase to the **School Repairs Program** to ensure that school facilities are safe, adequate, and ready for learning. The Public School Facilities Improvement Grant Program funds are directed out of the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

Cyber Charter Reform

The cost of cyber school tuition for Pennsylvania's school districts varies between \$7,659 and \$28,960 per non-special education student. This outdated model is inconsistent with the costs associated with providing a virtual education and restricts funds that could be used to provide essential instruction, update facilities, fund CTE programs, or develop curriculum. The 2025-2026 budget establishes an \$8,000 per student statewide cyber charter tuition rate which would

better align cyber tuition with the actual cost of providing an online education and save school districts \$378 million annually.

Investments in Early Learning

Every child in Pennsylvania deserves the support they need to succeed from infancy through early adulthood. Students who receive high quality pre-K are more likely to graduate high school and lead a successful life. To give our youngest learners the foundation they deserve, the 2025-2026 proposed budget calls for a \$15 million increase for the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program to raise wages for pre-K educators and stabilize the early educator workforce. With this funding increase, the rate per seat will increase from \$10,500 to \$11,000 for full-time seats and from \$5,250 to \$5,500 for part-time seats.

The budget proposal also includes \$90.9 million to maintain funding for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. The federal Head Start program provides comprehensive pre-K education resources to families at or below the federal poverty level or experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care. The Supplemental Assistance Funding allows Head Start programs to extend services to more children and families in need. In addition, this proposed budget calls for a \$14.6 million increase to the Preschool Early Intervention program to provide essential services to families and communities to address the needs of children ages three to five with developmental delays. Adequately funding these programs ensures that children receive the high-quality support and resources they need to improve their overall well-being, regardless of family income.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is working diligently to address the ongoing educator workforce shortage by removing barriers to entering the teaching profession and utilizing funds to further strengthen the educator pipeline and teacher retention efforts. Since 2019, the Commonwealth has seen steady and consistent growth in the number of students enrolled in and graduating from educator preparation programs. In fact, the number of students enrolled in educator preparation programs has surpassed program enrollment from 2014. While progress has been made over the last five years, there is still a measurable educator shortage in the Commonwealth, particularly in the areas of special education and middle-level math certification. This issue especially impacts students in our urban, rural, and low-income communities.

Identifying this as a priority for the future of our Commonwealth, the Governor's 2025-2026 budget proposes a \$20 million increase for the student teacher grant program facilitated by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, bringing the total allocation to \$40 million. Additionally, the proposed budget includes \$25 million to continue to fund the Grow PA Scholarship Program to help students pursue affordable postsecondary education programs and fill critical in-demand occupations after graduation, including education.

Investments in Higher Education

Building on the Governor's bold reimagining of higher education last year, the 2025-2026 budget continues to invest in the success of the Commonwealth through its public colleges and universities. A robust and accessible higher education infrastructure is essential for the sustainability and growth of a strong economy. The Governor understands the need for a higher education system that incorporates employer needs, activates institutions to meet those needs, and empowers students to succeed, which is why this budget proposal includes:

- \$13 million increase for community colleges to be administered through the Community College Funding Formula;
- \$40.4 million increase for PASSHE universities, to keep tuition level for the 8th year in a row;
- Approximately 5% increases for Lincoln University, Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology; and
- \$60 million increase to state-related universities Penn State, Pitt, and Temple, to be distributed through a Performance-based Funding Formula.

For the first time, the Commonwealth's institutions of higher education are starting to row in the same direction. The Performance-based Funding Council is working to make recommendations to establish a performance-based funding formula to ensure the dollars that are driven out to our state-related universities are transparent, outcome-driven, and predictable. In addition, the newly established State Board of Higher Education is working with postsecondary leaders throughout the Commonwealth to establish a strategic plan and make recommendations that promote greater postsecondary access, quality, affordability and accountability.

Commonwealth Libraries

Libraries provide an essential service to their communities and are often the only outlet for many underserved Pennsylvanians to access critical services and programming. Libraries provide resources such as enhanced broadband access, job search materials, and an abundance of learning tools. Communities with active libraries have more informed, civically involved citizens. The Governor's proposed budget includes a \$581,000 increase to continue supporting operations and facilities at the State Library of Pennsylvania.

Conclusion

The 2025-2026 budget proposal builds on the momentum established by the investments made during Governor Shapiro's first two years in office. This budget addresses the needs of all Pennsylvania learners, creates opportunity and pathways to success for students, and acknowledges the importance that education plays in establishing an economy that works for all Pennsylvanians.

Chairmen and respected members of the House Appropriations Committee, I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and look forward to working with the General Assembly to ensure all learners have access to high-quality education and resources and have pathways to success in Pennsylvania.