



Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee Public Hearing Testimony on Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools in Pennsylvania

presented by

**The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
June 17, 2020**

Good morning Chairman Sonny, Chairman Roebuck, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dr. Eric Eshbach, recently retired Superintendent of the Northern York County School District and Legislative Chair of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). I am here today representing PASA, whose members include school district superintendents, assistant superintendents, executive directors and other public-school system leaders from across Pennsylvania. I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding the reopening of school this coming fall.

Pennsylvania's schools were suddenly thrust into an unprecedented situation with the Governor's order to close all schools on March 13 due to the Coronavirus. Districts had to quickly adapt to prepare meals and educate their students through alternative methods with no warning or time to plan. Within a few days, most districts began providing lunch distributions in their communities for students to meet their basic needs. As the closure extended through early April, districts shifted from just providing meals and some educational activities through online programs or other distance-learning options, to a model where all students' needs were being addressed. This proved to be a monumental task, given the little time and advanced preparation needed. Whether the distribution of hundreds or even thousands of meals a week to the delivery of instruction that somewhat mimicked what would have been going on in schools, the challenge was huge. The communication that was sent to parents was simple: "Despite the efforts we are taking, we realize that this can in no way replace the instructional and managerial programs we have honed in our traditional, face-to-face environment." When schools were closed through the

remainder of the 2019-2020 school term, school districts pivoted once again to deliver planned instruction to ensure students could graduate or pass on to the next grade level. It was an extraordinary sequence of events causing school districts to quickly change their systems of operation as the Coronavirus spread throughout our state and nation.

The challenges of the final 12 weeks of the school year were overwhelming, time-consuming, expensive, and frustrating. One of the most frustrating features of this environment was the fact that there is no “play book” for such a crisis. School district leaders felt the same pain as state leaders as we attempted to implement in days or even hours, what would normally take weeks or months to implement. We also experienced the same dissatisfaction from our constituents as many of you may have experienced: those who felt what we were requiring was overly excessive; those who felt that our efforts did not go far enough; and those who encouraged us with the realization that there was no “simple answer” to our work during this crisis. Yet, educators rose to the challenge by staying connected with their students and families to provide meaningful educational programs for students. PASA commends the many educators across the Commonwealth who went above and beyond to assist students in a variety of ways during this challenging time. Their work has been truly inspirational. In the first days of the shut-down, I had teachers providing study sessions for students as they were preparing for their AP exams, despite the fact that there was no instructional requirement in the first two weeks of the shut-down. Paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators have worked together in my district to coordinate the preparation and distribution of lunches, technology devices, and mobile hot spots. The teachers of special subjects like art, music, library, and physical education provided activities for students, just as the core content teachers. They worked long hours to accomplish this in an environment where they had minimal training, and they did a phenomenal job. Suffice it to say, I know of no teachers or administrators who were less involved in the education and lives of their students during this time than they were prior to this shut down. Many worked evening and weekend hours while simultaneously managing their family lives. It is difficult to be an educator during these times.

As the current school year quickly comes to an end in this closure environment, school leaders are planning for the opening of school in the fall. Just as the last 12 weeks of the 2019-

2020 school year were fraught with many unknowns and a landscape that seemed to change daily, we see the same on the horizon for reopening schools in the fall. Schools must be prepared for multiple contingencies as the virus will most likely dictate how and when schools will open. In fact, we are encouraging school superintendents to consider three possible scenarios for the reopening of school:

- A traditional model of instruction in which students return to school in an environment like what was experienced prior to March 13, yet we know that life will not be exactly as it was prior to March 13.
- A hybrid model of instruction in which there is some face-to-face instruction and some on-line instruction.
- A remote model of instruction in which the delivery of instruction is dependent upon on-line and correspondence interaction.

The best-case scenario would be that the entire state will be in the green level of recovery and schools will open on schedule with several new guidelines in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Even in this “traditional model,” we know for sure that school will never be the same as it once was before the pandemic. Until there is an effective treatment or vaccine for the virus, schools will have to take several operational precautions daily to help mitigate the virus and apply as many protections for staff and students as possible.

Despite the model of instruction that is required in the fall, new protocols will have to be implemented that will cause significant changes to normal school routines. These will require new procedures and practices to be implemented for daily school operations. School superintendents began the planning for the 2020-2021 school year well before the end of the 19-20 school year. They are now faced with the monumental task of planning how the reopening of school will look. In the case of the Northern York County School District, there are 49 business days left to complete this planning, IF the school board and administration decide to follow the adopted calendar for next school year. In that time, they have many decisions to make, including but certainly not limited to:

- Developing the Health and Safety Plan designated by PDE for schools to reopen
- Revisiting and updating the Continuity of Education Plan

- Preparing for athletic and extra-curricular programs to begin again, in accordance with the Health and Safety Plan adopted by the School Board
- Determining how to transport students to school in a manner consistent with the guidelines for social distancing, many of which contradict each other
- Determining how we can manage social distancing in an elementary, middle, and high school setting. This includes determining whether all students can come to school and, if not, which student should attend which school and when. In all honesty, administrators are looking at identifying which students can continue to be educated in an on-line environment and which need to be in school
- Communicating with parents as to how the schedule that is adopted will impact them, the care of their children when they are not in school, and the financial impact on already-stressed families who may not be able to afford childcare on a consistent basis throughout the school year
- Developing multiple school calendars for the School Board to consider depending on which model needs to be implemented
- Identifying content areas and students who have experienced a significant lapse in academic growth due to the spring shutdown and designing methods to bring those students up to a level where they can continue to progress at a rate similar to what they would have experienced
- Planning for budgetary, managerial, and staffing impacts such as expanded cleaning protocols, the purchasing of additional supplies and equipment, training students and staff on new hygiene practices, and the proper assignment of staff who are medically fragile
- Developing social distancing strategies for school cafeterias, gyms, and auditoriums, limiting the movement of students throughout the day, and how to reduce class sizes
- Training of staff to quickly pivot to a hybrid or online learning model
- Limitations of field trips and educational trips
- Limitations to spectators at athletic competitions, music performances, and other student activities
- Modifying morning entry and afternoon dismissal of students
- Developing protocols to monitor the health status of students and staff

- Preparing for extended absences of students and staff if they are infected with COVID-19
- Development of criteria to determine if and when the district, a school, or a classroom should be closed due to a COVID-19 outbreak

These are just a few of the considerations that school leaders are working through to assure that their schools can reopen safely. Many of these protocol changes will require increased resources and personnel. Yet, districts are facing a difficult budget year. While we appreciate the level funding for Pre-K through 12 education, we expect local revenues through tax collection will decrease significantly due to the economic downturn.

If districts must implement some type of hybrid schooling option, and I truly believe that this is the model many school districts will begin the year, the costs of school operations may increase significantly in addition to the costs associated with the new school protocols already described. A hybrid option would cause districts to only bring a portion of their students to school at one time to maximize social distancing, while the other students remain at home. This model could increase the transportation budget by requiring more bus runs and the need for more transportation drivers. More staff may be needed to assist students who are working from home while teachers are working with the students who are in school. Schools would continue to provide both in-school and remote lunch programs, adding extra costs for the logistics or running a dual food service operation. The hybrid option will require additional training for teachers and staff to navigate both an in-person and online instructional delivery method. It would also add an extra burden to families with multiple children as some children may be in school while others are home. This option may very well be the most challenging and expensive to operate. Couple these concerns with the very real concern of who will be watching the children when they are at home and on-line. The current closure has occurred at the same time businesses have closed, meaning that many parents are working from home. In a model where there may need to be a rotating schedule of which students attend school on certain days of the week, we cannot lose sight of the impact this will have on families as they struggle to find childcare or have to make the difficult decision not to go to work so that someone is at home with the children.

Finally, schools must be prepared for another temporary or lengthy school closure. Unfortunately, the virus may have a resurgence this fall or winter, and another school closure may be necessary. Districts will need to have a plan to quickly pivot to online or some type of distance learning. We have learned a great deal about delivering remote learning this spring, and districts will be better prepared for this scenario should it become necessary next school year. One of the biggest lessons we've learned is that we will need to move away from an "Enrichment and Review" model and towards a "Planned Instruction" model in which new concepts are taught, grading is expected, and attendance, in some way, shape, or form, is required. However, districts will need additional help from the state and federal government to ensure they have the technology resources, internet, and broadband capacity to reach every child. PASA extends its gratitude to the Department of Education for providing a free, on-line learning platform to districts during the recent closure. This resource, along with hardware access and internet access for all students, is critical if remote learning is to be equitable and successful. Additionally, ongoing training for educational staff members is imperative to effectively deliver remote learning.

Although these challenges seem daunting, PASA believes they can be overcome through creativity, cooperation, collaborative planning between school districts, and adequate financial support. We understand there are no easy answers but are committed to being part of the solution. We extend our commitment of cooperation to this Committee, General Assembly, Governor, and the Department of Education to find solutions on behalf of our students.

Sincerely,

Eric Eshbach, Ed.D.