



Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials

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**Remarks of Laura E. Cowburn, PRSBA
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State Education Funding
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Capitol Rotunda**

Good morning. I am Laura Cowburn, Assistant to the Superintendent for Business Services/Board Secretary for the Columbia Borough School District. My district, located in Lancaster County, serves about 1500 students with a \$22 million budget.

As you have heard, tomorrow is the second consecutive month that school districts across the state will miss their payday. The last Thursday of each month is the electronic transmission of deposits to local education agencies for a variety of our programs—instructional and non-instructional alike. In July schools missed state payments for transportation, school construction reimbursement, the state share of Social Security costs and special education funding. August is worse with our first missed basic education funding payment—the largest of the state subsidies—plus reimbursement for charter school tuitions and vocational education to name a few. In my district, my estimated withheld state support is \$ 1.3 million.

Just like state employees who continued to work without pay, we continue to educate without state support. Most Districts across the state will begin the school year starting Monday. Busses will deliver students, buildings will have been cleaned and open, teachers will be in the classroom, textbooks and computers will have been purchased, lunches will be served and the educational process for another year will begin—all exclusively funded with local resources. State support is missing in action.

During this budget impasse schools will not get a pass. Our accountability for adequate yearly progress will not be put on hold. Our accountability to meet state standards will not be delayed. Our accountability for special needs students will not be placed on hold. Our financial accountability to pay for instruction, transportation, food service, technology, utilities, insurance and extra-curricular activities will not be waived.

The organizations represented here today and many others who are supporters of the PA School Funding Campaign are not just seeking a payday or a payoff. We don't just want dollars; we want a partner. We want a partner that recognizes the necessity of a shared responsibility for student achievement. We want a partner that puts its money where the mandates are for accountability and success of our students. We want a partner that understands adequacy is not just a local responsibility.

At the school district level life goes on. But in my district a state partner that funds adequately and equitably could provide a much better life. The Columbia Borough School District does not have a growing tax base. Our district boundaries surround a landlocked local tax base. Our revenues grow only when our local tax rates increase. We have been very conscious of our property tax burden because many of our taxpayers are not wealthy. Our aid ratio, a commonly used indicator for district wealth, is the highest of all Lancaster County school districts. Our personal income and market value expressed on a per student basis are the lowest in the county. Said another way, we are the poorest district in Lancaster County.

We don't have an abundance of local resources. Our student achievement gains have come as a result (in part) of the additional resources we received from the Educational Assistance Program for tutoring and the opportunity for full-day kindergarten and class size reduction money from the Accountability Block Grant—all state initiatives. Resources for programs such as Dual Enrollment, and Science It's Elementary would not have been available in our district without state support because our local tax base just can't afford to provide these additional programs.

New federal stimulus funds will help us, temporarily, provide additional resources that we would normally not be able to provide. You have heard from legislators that schools will see an increase in funding as a result of the stimulus programs even if there is no increase in Basic Education Funding. Remember additional funding does not necessarily reduce the local burden. This is not permanent funding – it is a two year supplement. While this may help us add initiatives to some of our programs, we face many, many mandates at the local level and these funds will not help us to pay for increased costs out of our local control. The federal stimulus funding will provide us with additional funding for Individuals with Disabilities Education Assistance (IDEA), but this money will not continue to help with recurring costs. We just had two students enroll last week and both will need full-time personal care assistants with them. So while we do receive more federal special education stimulus funding, those funds will not be sustained for the educational and supplemental services of these students. More federal funding may just assure that we do not fall further behind in our effort to meet the special needs of some of our students. These budget discussions do not include any corrections to the out-dated Special Education funding formula so this continues to be a funding shortfall for schools like Columbia that have a significant special needs population.

Clearly, we have lot to lose in this budget debate. My district has a line of credit at a local bank and is preparing for the possibility of a Tax and Revenue Anticipation Note as well. If flat funded, we face layoffs and cuts in programs. The Governor's position will allow us to continue many of the successful programs we have used to boost our student achievement. Other proposals impose cuts that are real and significant and turn us away from the one definitive and objective standard—the Costing Out Study—that shows how far we need to go to meet adequacy targets.