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HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE

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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING

Topic: Instructing Students During COVID-19

G-50 Irvis Office Building – Harrisburg, PA

August 25, 2020

AGENDA

- 2:00 p.m. Welcome and Opening Remarks
- 2:10 p.m. Panel of School Districts:
- Brian Polito
Superintendent
Erie School District
 - Richard Emerck
Superintendent
Fort LeBoeuf School District
 - Ian Roberts
Superintendent
Millcreek Township School District
- 2:40 p.m. *Questions & Answers*
- 3:00 p.m. Aaron Chapin
Vice President
Pennsylvania State Education Association
- 3:10 p.m. *Questions & Answers*
- 3:30 p.m. Closing Remarks

HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING

ERIE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS TESTIMONY

Presented August 25, 2020

Mr. Brian J. Polito, CPA, Superintendent of Schools

Good afternoon Committee Members. Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding student instruction during COVID-19.

I would also like to thank you for supporting level state funding for school districts in 2020-21. That decision eliminated much of the budgetary uncertainty districts faced and allowed us to focus on the most important task at hand – safely educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2016, shortly before the state adopted the Basic Education Funding Commission's fair funding formula, Erie's Public Schools began lobbying the Governor and Legislature for an increase to its basic education subsidy allocation. Our argument for an increase was based on the following facts:

1. The state's funding formula has consistently been rated as one of the most inequitable in the country due to the funding gap between high- and low-poverty districts.
2. Erie's Public Schools median household income and its state and local funding per pupil were in the bottom 3% in the state.
3. Despite making millions of dollars in budget cuts that placed our per pupil spending in the bottom 10% in the state, the district was still facing multi-million budget deficits.
4. The decision to only distribute new money through the newly adopted fair funding formula meant that funding inequities would be addressed over decades, not years – too little, too late for the district's current financial crisis.

We were the posterchild for the state's school funding inequities. In 2017, our efforts resulted in a permanent and recurring \$14 million increase in our basic education allocation which put us on the path to recovery. Since then, we have developed and begun implementation of a strategic plan to address our educational challenges, a financial plan to ensure long-term financial stability, and a facilities plan focused on critical building infrastructure repairs and renovations needed to make our schools warm, safe, and dry. Conditions that students in better funded school districts take for granted.

Although we are very appreciative of the funding adjustment, it came too late to assist us with the current crisis. Years of underfunding has resulted in millions of dollars in deferred building maintenance. Roofs leak, building exteriors are crumbling, and most of our antiquated heating and ventilation systems either do not function properly or do not meet current standards for outside airflow. Both the CDC and the Pennsylvania Department of Education return to school guidance require properly functioning ventilation systems with adequate outside airflow.

Most of these issues are being addressed as part of our facility plan, however the work is scheduled to be completed over the next six years. We are doing everything we can to

accelerate the ventilation repairs and believe we will have our elementary school operable by November 4th. Unfortunately, many of the repairs and upgrades required in our middle and high schools are very extensive and cannot be completed in the short-term. The guidance indicates that opening windows is an effective way to increase airflow but it is not a practical solution during an Erie winter. Unlike other school districts in the region, we will likely be forced to continue remote instruction for these students until the spring of 2021.

As a high-poverty urban school district, our students face many more social, economic, and health issues than their peers in wealthier districts. For many of our most at-risk students, school is the safest place for them to be. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania's inequitable funding system has once again deprived them of something that students in wealthier zip codes take for granted.

I strongly encourage you to continue advocating for fair funding for all urban school districts in Pennsylvania. Our students deserve the same experiences and opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Democratic House Policy Committee Hearing

Testimony By:

Richard B. Emerick, Superintendent
Fort LeBoeuf School District
August 25, 2020

First, I would like to thank the members of the Democratic House Policy Committee for inviting me to share a few key points as they relate to the Fort LeBoeuf School District's (FLB) plans to reopen our schools and safely welcome our students in the Fall.

In terms of where we are today, we intend to reopen on September 9, 2020 and like many other school districts across the Commonwealth, we chose to empower our families by offering them a choice between two instructional pathways by which they could enroll their children; a traditional brick and mortar option where students will attend each of our schools for face to face instruction and our locally owned and operated, (tuition free online public school education option) FLB Cyber Academy where our students will be reconnected with our own FLB teachers for both synchronous as well as asynchronous online instruction. Currently, 80% of our families have enrolled their children in our brick and mortar option and 18% will be entering into our cyber academy. The remaining 2% have elected a different option altogether, such as home school instruction or another cyber/charter school.

For those students joining us in person each day, our district is prepared for and has implemented several mitigation measures that are geared to slow the spread of the virus:

- Upon arrival each morning, each student will be screened to determine if he/she has a fever. This will be done using a touchless digital thermometer. Febrile students will be immediately referred to our school nurses for further evaluation.
- We have developed an at-home health screening checklist, which we have provided to our families so they can screen their children at home. All FLB families will be asked to complete this form each day

before sending their child or children to school. If it is determined that a child has a fever or is not feeling well, we are requesting that families keep their child at home.

- Several Hand Sanitizing stations will be placed in convenient locations and common areas in each school building. As all of us know, hand hygiene is one of the most fundamental measures we can take to slow the spread of the virus.
- COVID-19 signs which cover these essential safety practices...wear a facial covering, maintain physical distance, and frequently wash your hands will be posted throughout each school building.
- Water fountains across the district have been disabled and new water bottle filling stations will be available throughout the buildings. Students will be encouraged to bring water bottles from home to remain hydrated throughout the school day.
- Classrooms are arranged to promote physical distancing in each instructional space to the greatest extent possible. Desks will be spaced apart and facing forward.
- Class sizes have been reduced to levels that promote physical distancing to the greatest extent feasible. On some occasions, class sizes may require us to utilize larger spaces such as our large group instruction rooms, auditoriums, and cafeterias. In addition, frequent masking breaks will be provided for children.
- Building level traffic patterns have been established to reduce hallway congestion between classes.
- Staggered dismissal procedures for each building have been set to further minimize student contact and reduce hallway congestion.
- Each classroom will be equipped with hand sanitizers as well as disinfectant wipes to ensure hands as well as work areas are cleaned before and after each class period.
- Our custodial staff has been incredible in preparing our buildings, and each of our teams will be implementing aggressive cleaning measures during the day and after school to ensure we do our very best to sanitize each building.
- Breakfasts and lunches will be provided at school for the students. As you may expect, physical distancing is required and students may be eating in their classrooms as well as in the cafeteria with limited occupancy.

As you may expect, carrying on a tradition of academic quality and rigor while establishing the aforementioned mitigation measures has been challenging, particularly when the guidance from both the federal and state levels has been less than explicit. That stated, planning for the unknown with one eye on sound instruction and the other on health and safety has impacted us on several levels including but not limited to: establishing new health protocols, disinfecting and sanitizing buildings and buses, face to face class scheduling while maintaining physical distancing, offering and adhering to protocols for extracurricular activities such as band, chorus, and sports, continuation of brick and mortar instruction while creating a new district owned and operated cyber academy, acquiring and distributing Chromebooks and internet hotspots to students and staff, and searching for and purchasing personal protective equipment.

In addition, addressing the aforementioned challenges has come with a cost. As of today, FLB has committed nearly \$600,000.00 on personal protective equipment, technology, curriculum materials, classroom furniture, and staffing to support our new cyber program as well as address the anticipated mental health needs of our students. Although these costs are currently manageable using COVID 19 relief funds (CARES - ESSER and COVID-19 Disaster Emergency School Health and Safety - PCCD), I fear future expenses to manage the pandemic will not be sustainable given the anticipated revenue shortfalls for FLB. Specifically, our district is projecting a decrease in real estate property tax collections due to property tax assessment appeals, reduced Earned Income Tax collection, increased delinquent property taxes, and continued losses on interest income.

In closing, the return to school this year will look and feel differently for everyone....our families and staff alike. Nevertheless, our educational mission and commitment to our children remains the same. We will continue to make every effort to create a safe environment, work to ensure our families feel connected and regardless if they are here with us face to face or online, we will continue to provide the essential services and implement the strategies necessary to allow our children to enjoy success here at FLB.

Thank you for the opportunity to share where we stand here at the Fort LeBoeuf School District. I really appreciate the invitation.



**Script of Millcreek Township School District
Pennsylvania House Policy Hearing
Return to School Plan testimony**

Good morning,

Thank you for the invitation to represent the voices of the Millcreek Township School District (MTSD) as we share an overview of our Return to School Plan. My name is Ian Roberts and I serve as the Superintendent of the Millcreek Township School District. Today, I will share an overview of the Return to School Plan for the District for the beginning of the school year 2020-2021. In anticipation of welcoming 7,000 students and 476 teachers back to school, on August 31st for teachers and September 8th for students, we convened a task force of diverse stakeholders in May 2020 to focus on a plan. The alphabetized items below are intended to provide an abbreviated version and information about our approach to instructional and operational topics. As you may be aware, my first day as superintendent was August 12, 2020. Prior to my arrival, our Interim Co-Superintendents Mrs. Moseley and Mr. O'Toole, in collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders, did an outstanding job of galvanizing the input of these stakeholders via surveys, board meetings, community forums, and personal outreach to make the most prudent decision for the District and community.

- a. The Return to School Task Force began meeting at the beginning of May and met weekly. Our team consists of initially 24, and now 27, members. Four subcommittees include learning, resources, communications, and wellness. Members include parents, teachers, admin, Board member, nursing department, curriculum department, pupil services department, custodian department, transportation department, IT department, safety department, personnel department, etc.
- b. Original Health & Safety Plan was adopted on 6/29/20 and revised on 8/3/20. The current plan approved for the first 45 days of the school year to be revised after an ongoing review.
- c. Challenge has been to plan effectively and keep up with changing state guidance/mandates.
- d. Strength has brought consistency across our region in District planning and collaboration.
- e. A/B hybrid model of instruction (blue days = A on T & TH; white days = B on W & F) as default model. Special education students with intensified needs may attend T – F for on-campus instruction. Students/families may choose a 100% virtual option for their students to learn virtually. Our District has also contracted with CAOLA as our MTSD Cyber Academy provider.

- f. Our county is currently in the moderate rating based on the incident rate and positive rate. Our plan is aligned with the blended learning recommendation in moderate.
- g. Concerns: transportation, staffing, substitute teacher shortage, unbudgeted expenses, availability of PPE, IT, and other needed equipment, contact tracing, etc.
- h. Two weeks ago, the District hired a Pandemic Coordinator Krystal Krawczyk. She is a registered nurse who, in collaboration with our Human Resources Team and Superintendent's Office, will lead our response to any positive cases, contact tracing, and other operational items regarding COVID-19.
- i. Our District's leadership team created a Return to Play Plan to guide our response to athletics, student-athletes, and coaches. The Return to Play considerations and plan was focused on the safety and well-being of student-athletes and coaches. This plan included the considerations and guidance generated from the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA), District 10, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) plan regarding all athletics.
- j. Our continued commitment as a District, with guidance and oversight from our Board of School Directors, is to anchor all of our instructional and operational decisions in quantitative and qualitative data from credible sources such as the PDE, CDC, PDH, as well as to follow the guidance of any proof points (very little) such as the return to play of professional sporting organizations such as the NBA, NHL, and NFL, as well as the NCAA. Our willingness to partner and collaborate with our neighboring school districts in our member Intermediate Unit (IU) is critical.

As part of our commitment to creating a well-rounded approach to ensuring our students, teachers, and school/district administrators' safety and well-being, we also prepared a healthy and safety plan. The summary is below.

Health and Safety Plan Summary

1. Facilities Cleaning, Sanitizing, Disinfecting, and Ventilation

- a. Windows will be opened to increase airflow when feasible
- b. High touch surfaces will be cleaned every 2 hours
- c. Nightly, the entire building/bus will be disinfected using electric sprayers, and an EPA approved disinfectant

2. Social Distancing and other Safety Protocols

- a. Classrooms will be arranged to allow for maximum distance between students and staff
- b. Directional signage to promote one-way traffic in hallways and on stairs
- c. Ongoing reminders and encouragement regarding social distancing (including posters and signs)

3. Below are some of the salient points of the plan:

- a. Elementary students will eat in classrooms.
- b. High school cafeterias will employ additional lunch sessions, a maximum distancing between tables, and use of additional spaces (such as an auxiliary gym).
- c. Assigned seats at all levels.

- d. Posters displayed to remind staff and students about proper handwashing/hygiene additional opportunities provided to students for hygiene/handwashing (breaks for washing, hand sanitizer available).
- e. Additional opportunities provided to students for hygiene/handwashing (breaks for washing, hand sanitizer available).
- f. Ongoing instruction from school nurses regarding hygiene and proper handwashing.
- g. Signs will be developed, created, or purchased and placed throughout school buildings.
- h. Outside use of District facilities will be limited and determined on a case by case basis, due to disinfecting needs of the District. Field trips may resume. Recess will resume for 15 minutes of outside walking activity with no equipment.
- i. Classrooms will be arranged to allow for maximum distance between students and staff.
- j. Directional signage to promote one-way traffic in hallways and on stairs.
- k. Ongoing reminders and encouragement regarding social distancing (including posters and signs).
- l. Outside use of District facilities will be limited and determined on a case by case basis, due to disinfecting needs of the District. Field trips may resume. Recess will resume for 15 minutes of outside walking activity with no equipment or playgrounds being utilized.
- m. Physical Education (PE) classes will resume face to face with no shared equipment and sporting units that are low risk.
- n. Students will be provided with personal materials to the greatest extent possible.
- o. If materials are shared, staff will ensure proper sanitization.
- p. Teachers will utilize online resources (texts, Google Classroom) to minimize the need for paper resources.
- q. 1:1 student: device will be in place to avoid sharing laptops or Chromebooks.
- r. Buildings will have clearly marked traffic patterns throughout the hallways to keep student interactions and passing minimized. Staff will be monitoring hallway and communal spaces for proper social distancing best practices. Stairwells will be identified for either up use only or down use only to limit student interactions and distancing on stairwells.
- s. In yellow, buses will load and dismiss one by one to limit student interactions. Students will ride one per seat and will be required to wear masks.
- t. In green, students will sit 1-2 per seat, and parents will be encouraged to provide their own transportation. Students will be required to mask while on the bus to the maximum extent feasible.
- u. Parents will be encouraged to transport students to the greatest extent possible.
- v. Yellow students in k-8 will attend every other day, limiting the number of students attending by 50%.
- w. To the greatest extent feasible, students will not transition throughout the day, limiting student interactions across all spaces.
- x. In yellow, the high school will be virtual.

- y. In green, student transitions and interactions will be limited to the maximum extent feasible.
- z. In green, k-12 students will attend every other day.
- aa. In red we are closed.
- bb. In yellow and green, all childcare provided by the District will be communicated through our Return to School webpage, accompanied by notifications to parents by emails, texts, and phone calls for any adjustments. Our Transportation Coordinator will communicate with other local childcare companies indicating any changes.
- cc. In red, we are closed. In yellow, we will incorporate the Centers for Disease, Control, and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Health (DOH) guidelines to the maximum extent feasible at all times.
- dd. In green, we will incorporate the CDC and DOH guidelines to the maximum extent feasible.

4. Monitoring student and staff health

- a. Staff and students will self-screen prior to reporting to school.
- b. All staff and students will be scanned for a fever of 100.4 degrees or higher upon entrance. Staff and students will also be temp checked if symptoms appear while at school. Staff will randomly be temp checked as well.
- c. The nursing department will track students' history of exposure, and the Personnel Department will track employees.
- d. Thermal scanners (2 per building with 1 at each entrance/exit), handheld thermometers for nursing offices and isolation areas tracking sheet developed for nurse use of students and for the Personnel Department's use for employees.
- e. Checklists provided to parents and staff to facilitate at-home parent screening (students) or self-screening (staff).
- f. Isolation and quarantining areas will be established (separate from the regular nursing office) for staff and students who are symptomatic. These areas will be stop-gap locations until students are picked up by a parent/guardian.
- g. Policy 203: Immunizations and Communicable Diseases.
- h. In yellow, we may shift to remote learning if a staff member is positive. They may return after the 14-day isolation or quarantine.
- i. In green, we will log students and staff who present as positive or are contacted traced to a positive case. We will follow the DOH guidelines for the 24-hour closure of the area where the case was in the building, isolation/quarantine requirements, and the DH return to work/school expectations.
- j. Policy 203: Immunizations and Communicable Diseases

5. Other Consideration for Students and Staff

- a. In yellow, students at higher risk may work remotely from home to avoid exposure.
- b. In yellow, staff should coordinate requests through the personnel department.
- c. In green, staff and students should provide proper documentation of a medical condition which necessitates consideration. Their needs will be accommodated as

required by law per medical recommendation. Additional hand sanitizing and cleaning protocols will be implemented as needed.

- d. Letter from the school nurse to parents of any student known to have any conditions associated with a risk of severe infection to facilitate individualized planning or additional safety measures.
- e. Letter from the personnel department to staff outlining the process for developing any necessary work-related plan for higher-risk employees.
- f. In yellow and green, all staff and students must wear masks (including facial shields).
- g. Students and staff should bring a fresh or cleaned mask to school every day. These masks should be school appropriate with acceptable messaging and visuals.
- h. Masking is required, and short breaks of under 10 minutes may be given.
- i. In yellow, students with complex medical, social/emotional, or academic needs will be addressed on an individual basis through the student support team, case managers, and administrators to address their unique and individualized needs.
- j. In green, students with complex medical, social/emotional, or academic needs will be addressed on an individual basis through the student support team, case managers, and administrators to address their unique and individualized needs.
- k. Social stories will be developed for these students as appropriate. Visual schedules and reminders will be developed for students who benefit from visual cueing. Direct instruction was implemented during extended school years to prepare students for expected hygiene protocols and social distancing.

Conclusion

As stated before, the Millcreek Township team is committed to grounding our decisions in data and following the guidance of the community, local, state, and national experts. Additionally, we believe that our commitment to being nimble, flexible, and have a willingness to pivot as necessary whenever the data, dynamics, or circumstances change will serve us well.



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Instructing preK-12 Students During COVID-19**

**Presented to the
House Democratic Policy Committee
August 25, 2020**

**By
Aaron Chapin
PSEA Vice President**

Good morning, Chairman Sturla, Representative Merski, and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Aaron Chapin. I am the Vice President of PSEA and on behalf of our 181,000 members, thank you for inviting PSEA to participate in this hearing.

In addition to serving as PSEA's Vice President, I'm also a fifth-grade teacher, husband to a special education teacher, and father to a daughter entering her freshman year of high school. Fair to say, the issue of providing instruction to students for the 2020-2021 school year is very personal for me.

Many of our schools are beginning the return to school this week – some entirely in-person, others entirely remote, and others through a hybrid or blended approach. Students, staff, educators, administrators, and families could never have imagined this reality – yet we are all navigating the complexities and challenges to the best of our ability during this historic crisis.

In all my years in the classroom and my years as a union leader at the local, regional, and statewide level – I have never witnessed the level of unprecedented change, palpable anxiety, and sense of loss and trauma felt by educators, students, and families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As communities throughout Pennsylvania prepare to return to school in whatever form, each faces the challenge of not only providing quality continuous education to students in new ways, but also ensuring students and staff are physically *and emotionally* safe as well. The reality of what lies ahead for each of us is staggering – and even more so in our communities with higher needs and fewer resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, and further exacerbated, the growing economic and racial inequities among our communities – everything from access to health care; increased risk of exposure to the disease based on your employment; increased food and housing insecurity; and limited access to technology and supports necessary for successful distance learning. We can not and must not lose sight of this fact as we continue to work together at the statewide and local level to provide our students with essential academic and social and emotional supports.

And while each community's plan for returning this fall should vary based on the needs and input of the local stakeholders, what must *not* vary is a strict adherence to the protocols and safety measures proven most effective for mitigating COVID-19 transmission in our schools. Failing to do so will result in needlessly exposing students, staff, and their families to this deadly virus causing further chaos and anxiety in our communities.

Last spring when the unthinkable became our collective reality, you and your colleagues took swift and decisive action to adopt Act 13 and provide the clarity and protections so desperately needed by our education community. PSEA urges the legislature to demonstrate that leadership once again and enact policies necessary to provide essential health and safety standards and employee protections for the 2020-2021 school year. The following pages contain these urgent needs and recommendations; PSEA stands ready to assist you with this critical effort. Thank you.

PSEA RECOMMENDATIONS:
EMERGENCY LEGISLATION FOR 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR

Require face coverings in all school settings by students and staff. The best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is by requiring everyone to wear a mask. Period.

Provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to essential staff and require robust, regular cleaning of facilities and sanitation regimen. Act 13 included a provision requiring school entities to provide custodial staff with PPE and we recommend this provision be carried forward into any legislation under consideration in the coming weeks. Our custodial staff are at the epicenter of efforts to keep schools clean – including the regular sanitation of surfaces, desks, hallways, handrails, restrooms, cafeterias, and buses. To do this efficiently and safely, districts must have consistent protocols and provide staff with sufficient and appropriate equipment and supplies.

Require notification and contact tracing if a student or employee tests positive. PSEA supports House Bill 2768, recently introduced by Representative Todd Stephens and cosponsored by Rep. Merski – which provides a process around notification of positive COVID-19 test results and clarity about the procedure following a positive result from a student or staff member.

Require clear and detailed quarantine protocols for students and staff. In addition to ensuring consistent procedures when a member of the school community tests positive, PSEA urges the adoption of consistent policies for what must occur when a student or employee shows COVID-19 symptoms during the school day. Sending students and staff members to visit a nurse, who may or may not have PPE, or who might have other students present with health issues unrelated to COVID-19, is not good practice. Our members are concerned that some of the health and safety plans approved by school entities thus far do not adequately address how positive cases among the school community will be addressed.

Ensure employees can safely quarantine if they test positive for COVID, are exposed to COVID, or are caring for a loved one with COVID. If a public school employee is exposed to COVID, we need the employee to quarantine, immediately. However, the very last thing we need are employees unable to quarantine because they lack either the leave time or the financial resources to be off work for two weeks. Ensuring paid leave for individuals exposed to COVID is the right thing to do for our school community, and one of the best possible ways to keep our schools open.

Prohibit schools as polling places or require additional sanitization and ventilation. As we all know, 2020 is a general election year. Many schools are used as polling stations for elections. During these times, it is not wise to have schools physically open as polling stations potentially allowing thousands of people into the schools to vote during a pandemic. This defeats the goal of trying to limit community spread. The easiest solution is to refrain from using schools as polling stations this year. Another option would be to require that schools close on election day – and possibly one or two days thereafter - to sanitize all physical areas of the school where polling stations were placed.

Prohibit furloughs of professional employees due to moving to remote learning.

Equally important, we need to keep teachers serving their students. District enrollment may be more volatile than at any time in recent memory because of this pandemic, but we expect that volatility to smooth out eventually. The very last thing we want is to lose thousands of teachers - who may leave the profession or the state forever - and then be unable to meet student needs once there is a return to in-person instruction and enrollment numbers may increase.

Unavailability of certification assessments may necessitate emergency permits.

The pandemic shut down teacher certification testing sites last spring and limited testing opportunities this summer for certification assessments to be completed. PSEA worked closely with PDE, as well as legislators and staff in both chambers, in developing legislative language to help address these concerns. Senate Bill 1216 - adopted by the Senate and amended last week by the House Education Committee - seeks to remedy these challenging realities. We urge your continued support for Senate Bill 1216 as it makes its way through the legislative process.

Ensure student teacher requirements remain flexible.

The pandemic upended the student teacher experience for many of our future educators and it threatens do so again. This is unfortunate and has the potential to exacerbate the existing teacher shortage crisis. Requirements around student teaching competencies state that no more than 50 percent of student teaching can occur in an online setting. Act 13 provided the Secretary with the authority to waive the twelve-week student teacher requirement under 22 Pa. Code § 354.25(f) for the 2019-20 academic year. This flexibility should be extended through the 2020-21 school year.

Extend provisions pertaining to standardized testing captured in Act 13.

We appreciate the swift action of PDE and the legislature to waive standardized testing requirements as part of Act 13. However, standardized testing remains a problem for the 2020-21 academic year. The last thing students and educators should be worried about next year is standardized testing and the impact of those scores, when the traditional educational model has been upended and many students will be playing catch-up. *Decisions, whether state or local, should not be made using standardized tests for this time period.*

In addition to carrying forward the provisions captured in Act 13, PSEA urges lawmakers to include in upcoming legislation a prohibition on local districts' use of the Keystone Exams as local graduation requirements in the 2020-2021 school year. We need to ensure consistent state policy and messaging around standardized testing at both the state and local levels. Also, given the unprecedented challenges we are all facing, PSEA will be engaging in conversations with PDE about whether or not the effective dates of the new statewide graduation pathways and educator evaluation system should be pushed out another year. (Currently, both take effect beginning in the 2021-22 school year.)

Protect employees that support students in multiple school settings.

Because we're relying on local control for reopening, there is no standard procedure for employees who work in multiple buildings – particularly intermediate unit (“IU”) employees who travel between buildings and serve multiple districts. Each school district has its own plan for reopening and its own schedule. It might be too late, but a requirement for districts to better coordinate with IUs in order to ensure better deployment of IU employees would be helpful.

Provide an extension for continuing education requirements to paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals are key to providing a free and appropriate public education to our students with special needs. Like our certified educators, our paraprofessionals have annual continuing education requirements that need to be met. Act 13 extended continuing education requirements for certified educators until June 30, 2021 due to the challenges raised in meeting those requirements due to COVID. We urge the same extension be provided to our paraprofessionals for the 2020-2021 school year and we thank Rep. Miller for already introducing the legislation needed to address this issue and Sen. Langerholc for including this provision in SB 1216.

Keep support staff ready to work.

Our Education Support Professionals (“ESPs”) provide critical services to our schools and students. It would be a disservice to these professionals, and to the schools and students they serve, if they have a lack of clarity about their job status. Schools cannot safely reopen without ESPs — the people who serve lunches, drive buses, and serve as classroom aides. But if these employees are repeatedly furloughed and brought back, and furloughed and brought back, they will be forced to seek other jobs. To keep our schools ready to educate our students, we must keep our support staff employed.