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**Allegheny Intermediate Unit
Prepared Comments
Impact of Population on Education Funding
Basic Education Funding Commission**

**Dr. Linda Hippert
Executive Director, Allegheny Intermediate Unit
October 21, 2014**

Good morning. I am Dr. Linda Hippert, the Executive Director for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. I am here today, along with Jamie Baxter, Director of Legislative Policy and Advocacy at the AIU. On behalf of the AIU's Board of Directors, and the 42 school districts representing over 116,000 students and 9,000 educators in Allegheny County served by the AIU, we appreciate the opportunity to present comments related to student population and funding, as you explore ways to improve education funding overall and work to develop a fair and equitable Basic Education Funding formula.

The Allegheny Intermediate Unit is the largest intermediate unit in the Commonwealth and works with suburban Allegheny County school districts and the communities they serve to help deliver educational opportunities to all learners (birth to adult) by providing specialized educational services in a high-quality, cost effective manner. We also service the five career and technical centers in the county and operate three schools for exceptional children, Mon Valley School, Pathfinder School, and Sunrise School.

We realize the challenge that is associated with fair and equitable funding as we acknowledge that the statistical representation of the population of Allegheny County similarly reflects the overall Commonwealth. The population of children in Allegheny County under the age of 18 is 241, 663 or approximately 8.7% of the overall children in the Commonwealth. 74.9% of children in this age group in the state are white; 13.8% are African American and in Allegheny county, the numbers are very similar with 72.4% of students being white and 18.8% African American. 39.6% of children under 18 in the Commonwealth are living in poverty whereas there are 35.9% children living in poverty in Allegheny County – again, quite similar statistics.

Academically, Allegheny County boasts a group of the highest performing districts in the Commonwealth as well as the lowest, along with the wealthiest and the poorest districts in the Commonwealth. In addition, some of the fastest growing districts as well as those with significant enrollment drops are in our county.

Therefore, as I provide my comments today relative to student population and funding, although they will focus on our county, I believe you will find them meaningful to the Commonwealth as well. I will present you with a better understanding of the population of the districts in Allegheny County as well as thoughts and considerations for moving forward. We must recognize that the solution is not always simple. Despite similarities in student population significant differences in individual school districts exists.

Population Shifts in Allegheny County

When asking our superintendents generally what should be taken into account in developing a fair and equitable funding formula the number one answer was enrollment of students. “Enrolled students” must be clearly defined and absolutely cannot be viewed in isolation. The public school enrollment data included on the Department of Education’s website shows that from 1993-94 to 2012-13 (the most current data posted), student population in Allegheny County decreased 13.2%, or by 21,991 students – moving from 166,186 to 144,195 students in K - 12. Pittsburgh Public Schools’ enrollment dropped by 13,815 students, attributing for 62.8% of the student decrease in enrollment in all of Allegheny County. The enrollment decrease in the suburban Allegheny County schools from 1992-93 to 2012-13, excluding Pittsburgh Public Schools, was 8,176 of the 126,079 or 6.5% of the suburban student population.

This general overview of aggregate Allegheny County data cannot clearly communicate the picture as we must remember that shifts in population within the county can be extremely challenging to individual school districts as local boards relying on local budgets must address these issues.

When looking closer, of the 42 suburban Allegheny County districts, eight districts or 1.9% of the districts encountered a population decrease of 9% or less (Bethel Park, Brentwood, Deer Lakes, North Hills, Plum, Shaler, South Park and West Mifflin).

Eight of the suburban districts had student population decreases between 1992-93 and 2012-13 of 11% to 19% (Baldwin-Whitehall, Cornell, East Allegheny, Elizabeth Forward, Gateway, Riverview, South Allegheny and Sto-Rox).

Seven districts (1.7%) decreased student population by 21% - 29% (Allegheny Valley, Carlynton, Clairton, Highlands, Keystone Oaks, Northgate, Steel Valley) and five (5) districts (11.9%) decreased in student enrollment by 31% - 64% (McKeesport, Penn Hills, Woodland Hills, Wilkesburg and Duquesne City).

Overall, 28 of the 42 school districts in Allegheny County incurred a student enrollment decrease, leaving 14 districts increasing in student enrollment.

Seven of the 14 districts with increasing enrollment rose by less than 1% to 7% (West Jefferson Hills, Fox Chapel, Hampton, Montour, Mt. Lebanon, North Allegheny, Upper St. Clair); two of the districts (Moon and Quaker Valley) increased between 12% and 16%; three of the districts (Avonworth, Chartiers Valley and West Allegheny) saw an increase between 27% and 32%; and two districts (Pine Richland and South Fayette) increased between 92% and 96%.

Therefore, 1/3 of suburban Allegheny County school enrollments increased, while 2/3 of the schools’ enrollments decreased.

Fifteen districts had increases in the single digits which may lead one to conclude that the change was not significant; however, the decreases represented by McKeesport (31%), Penn Hills (34%), Woodland Hills (35%) Wilkesburg (45%) and Duquesne City (64%) are significant. For Duquesne City, one must remember that during that time period, seventh through twelfth grade students were moved to East Allegheny and West Mifflin, yet even those districts with the additional students experienced some loss of population – 14% and 2% respectively.

Also critically important as you explore potential funding formulas is recognizing that five districts substantially increased – West Allegheny (27%), Chartiers Valley (30%) and Avonworth (32%). South Fayette with a 92% student enrollment increase and Pine Richland with 96% are two of the fastest growing districts in the Commonwealth.

As you absorb this wealth of student enrollment data for Allegheny County alone, it begins to demonstrate the complexity of the issue.

Numbers alone cannot possibly identify financial needs. A general assumption would be that if enrollment increases, more dollars are required to operate and as it decreases, less would be necessary. This is the fallacy that exists in current charter school funding. Generally, we know that it takes a significant increase or decrease to crucially affect expenditures related to staffing, facilities and transportation – major expenses to schools. At the elementary level, unless enrollment decreases are prevalent at a grade level and in a specific building (where districts have multiple buildings), little savings can occur. At the secondary level, staff must often remain in order to provide a sufficient academic and elective program. When students leave the home district to attend a charter or non-public school, expenses often actually increase because of the added transportation routes or stops necessary.

Likewise with growing school populations, like Pine Richland and South Fayette, as well as Avonworth, Chartiers Valley and West Allegheny, not only are expenses required for additional staff, but new facilities must be built to accommodate the growth and often buses must be purchased to accommodate more runs.

Having been the Superintendent in South Fayette for 13 years, I well understand this challenge. Taxpayers assume that the growth in residential housing should support the enrollment growth. But in such a community, where commercial and industrial revenue is below 20%, new residential housing does not support both increased staff and new facilities. Therefore numbers of students alone do not create a sufficient and necessary basis to establish funding. Other factors must be carefully considered.

In a school district such as West Allegheny, commercial growth, particularly when tax incremental financing (TIFs) on these properties matures, assists with additional resources and softens the burden to the residential taxpayer.

As student population changes, often socio-economic changes may result as well, reflected by the free and reduced lunch percentages in the buildings and district, requiring added resources to assist and provide more to these underserved populations. If we are to attempt to create a more equitable education, whereby students have similar opportunities i.e. access to technology, course content, etc. then the student and community population must be a factor in determining a fair and equitable funding formula.

Our schools and communities must attempt to “fill the gap” that children and youth in these districts encounter. When after school programs and activities in our poorest schools are eliminated, the children suffer the most as their families and their communities cannot provide the support needed to fill that void.

Often students who are “behind” are determined to be intellectually disabled, thus requiring special instruction and programming without appropriate funding to address it. This student population must be considered as the Basic Education Funding formula is developed; otherwise the inequities grow even greater. Although this year’s modification to dispersing additional funds for special education was approved, the legislation failed to address the significant problem that exists for funding special education students enrolled in charter schools. As costs of educating children with disabilities increase, the funding must keep pace or programs serving other children will suffer.

Accountability in Struggling Districts

In reviewing the School Performance Profile for Districts for 2012-13 as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, eight Allegheny County school districts rank in the top 10% (North Allegheny, Mt. Lebanon, Upper St. Clair, Moon, Quaker Valley, Montour, South Fayette and West Allegheny) and eight Allegheny County school districts rank in the bottom 10% (Cornell, Penn Hills, Woodland Hills, Clairton, Sto-Rox, McKeesport, Duquesne City and Wilksburg).

A closer look reveals the average percentage of economically disadvantaged in the top 10% state rankings from Allegheny County is 12.7% and the average percentage of economically disadvantaged students in school districts in Allegheny County ranking in the bottom 10% on the District School Performance Profile is 74%.

The patterns observed for Allegheny County are reflected similarly throughout the Commonwealth and despite sincere efforts by staff in many districts, the gaps continue to widen, inequities continue to occur and children continue to suffer.

All districts should have access to robust, meaningful curricula with appropriate resources for implementation, including but not limited to technology. Teachers in the classroom must be provided with extensive professional development, not only to learn “what” they now must teach, but strategies they can utilize in order to reach all children.

If a district’s curriculum is not aligned to the new PA Core Standards, which will be assessed in 2015, student performance will not be reflected accurately. Teachers must learn to assess differently, asking questions like “Write your own fable with the moral “Gratitude is the sign of noble souls” rather than “What does the word *thankful* mean?” (Brookhart, Susan. 2014. *How to Design Questions and Tasks to Assess Student Thinking*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD)

This change to emphasize higher-order thinking skills will take time, but we know is much needed by our children to be successful in the 21st century. As educators we must take children from where they are academically, as well as socially and emotionally, to where they need to be. Today is much different than it was 10 years ago and even significantly different than just three years ago.

But the data quite clearly speaks for itself, demonstrating the greatest needs and lowest performances in our districts with the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged children. Not only is fair and consistent funding needed in these districts, but also assistance in implementing research based programs that have proven to be successful with the populations being served.

Hold Harmless

Most recently, the General Assembly has been discussion eliminating the “hold harmless” clause for school funding. One could easily argue that with enrollment decreases, proportionally less dollars should be allocated to those districts. In a perfect world, or perfect education system, which already maintained a fair and equitable funding formula, perhaps this might even be true. However, in today’s funding environment such a drastic move would be extremely detrimental to school districts and could easily further exacerbate an already dire financial status of many districts. New “ideas” leading to legislation must be thoughtfully considered and the effects of implementation should be studied carefully. Too often, good intentioned “ideas” result in significant burdens to districts.

If a completely new fair funding formula, which takes into account district student enrollment, resident student data, charter school enrollment, special education, English language learner and economically disadvantaged populations along with available facilities, condition of facilities, location of facilities, transportation needs, size and location of district, etc. perhaps the “hold harmless” clause could and should be phased out.

We know however that manipulating and weighting this number of variables would be challenging, yet this would more sharply distinguish the differences that exist in individual districts. This would be yet another compelling reason for the Commonwealth to provide districts with student information and financial software which would easily enable required data gathering for utilization, and improve the financial burden associated with PIMS implementation.

Districts must have stability in funding in order to plan appropriately for students and focus efforts on improving teaching and learning. While student populations will fluctuate, in order to be successful, districts must provide a consistent curriculum with meaningful core courses and electives that reflect the ever-changing needs of our workforce. This cannot be achieved, even in our wealthiest districts, without a predictable and stable funding formula.

The amount of funding received annually by a district cannot be left as a political decision of the legislators. Pennsylvania must make a serious commitment to the education of its youth and should revisit and re-emphasize the

purpose of public education in the Commonwealth. Education in our Commonwealth cannot be looked at as individual segments, for each time a change occurs in one section; it has an impact on another.

The original intent of the charter school legislation was to create unique laboratories for change, allowing innovative practices and research to occur, ultimately allowing the traditional public school to benefit. We know now that this vision did not become that reality in many cases and the established formula for funding, although perhaps made with good intent, is not working, and in fact is bankrupting many of our districts.

Failure to act and take charter school funding into account as part of a fair formula for funding would be irresponsible.

Conclusion

The task accepted by the Basic Education Funding Commission is indeed a worthy one. To achieve economic success in Pennsylvania and our nation, we know well that our children, our future, must be educated and in fact, well educated. They must be “learners” who are able to communicate, collaborate, think critically and problem solve. We cannot teach “all” of the content that they need to know, for we know that it is estimated that “1.5 exabytes of unique, new information is generated worldwide annually, more than the previous five thousand years.”

In the modified words of Margaret Mead, “Currently we are preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist and that will use technology that has not yet been invented in order to solve problems we don’t even know yet are problems.” Therefore, we as educators must approach our work differently in order to meet the many challenges with which we are faced as we strive to educate our youth.

Pennsylvania must renew the nation’s belief that “an educated citizenry is essential” and “only education would create a citizenry that would not collapse into factions because of their higher loyalty to the nation.”

The future of our children and youth lies in the hands of the legislators and the governor of this Commonwealth. The failure to make a commitment to our children would demonstrate an unwillingness to create for them, a better future. Every child must be given an equitable opportunity to pursue their dreams so that in turn, they may give back to our society as a competent, knowledgeable and productive citizen.

The Commission that has been established has the potential to inspire the necessary vision and make the changes needed to “do what is right” but certainly “not what is easy” to make that happen. Our sincere appreciation for the work is extended along with the offer to contribute in any way during the process.

On behalf of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and our 42 School Districts, I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to present comments to you today and wish you well as you work to fulfill your mission.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dr. Linda B. Hippert, Executive Director
Representing the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and Allegheny County School Districts