



**HARRISBURG SCHOOL DISTRICT**  
1601 State Street, Harrisburg, PA 17103

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## **Testimony before the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission**

Thursday, March 12, 2015 @ 10:00 am

### **Harrisburg School Board**

Jennifer Smallwood, President

James R Thompson AIA, Vice President

### **Jennifer Smallwood, President – Welcome**

Good Morning! I am Jennifer Smallwood, President of the Board of School Directors for the Harrisburg School District. I extend a warm thank you to Senator Teplitz and to the members of the Pennsylvania Basic Education Funding Commission for inviting Vice President Thompson and me to offer testimony regarding the challenges faced by the Harrisburg School District.

### **James R Thompson AIA, Vice President**

#### **Our Diverse Harrisburg Community Culture:**

The Harrisburg School District is truly diverse. We have 6500 students from many world cultures. Our students hail from 30 different countries, including Bhutan, Congo, Somalia, Guatemala, India, Pakistan and Puerto Rico, and speak 18 different languages. 12% of our students receive pupil support services as English Language Learners. 26% of our students speak a language other than English at home. 86% of our students live at or below the Federal Poverty Level. 400 or 6% of our 6500 students are homeless. 87% of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. 60% of our students are African-American, 30% are Hispanic and 6% Asian.

#### **Students Ready for Kindergarten:**

Students under age 5 might be lucky enough to get into a pre-school slot in federally-funded Headstart programming. Scientifically sound research proves that the earlier children begin school, the better they succeed during their remaining educational experience.

Each year, Harrisburg has 200-300 students unable to access the Headstart program due to lack of funding. **This is half of our incoming kindergarten students.** Our district needs broader access to early childhood education and a secure, sustainable funding source for quality Pre-K programming to assure that our students arrive prepared for kindergarten.

### **Enhanced Student Attendance and Safety:**

We are concerned for the safety of our students walking long distances to school. Due to budgetary constraints, we have increased walking distances to 1.5 miles for kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and 2 miles for high school students to cut costs. Further, parents may keep students at home due to inclement weather conditions, for concerns regarding safety and security, and the increased walking distance. These factors directly impact attendance and adversely affect student learning outcomes. Our goal is to reduce the distance to a ½ mile for K-8 and 1 mile for high school students at an estimated annual cost of \$2 million.

Unique to Harrisburg, 48% of all properties are exempt from property tax; of which 40% is state-owned. Therefore, a state payment in lieu of taxes could benefit our children with sustainable, secure funding for transportation, improving Harrisburg student attendance and student safety.

### **Jennifer Smallwood, President**

#### **Improving Graduation Rates:**

As a School District in Recovery, we have lost staffing in the areas of counseling, social workers, home school visitors, teen parenting support and parent liaisons that help our at-risk students stay in school. 2300 of our 6500 students are transient, ending the school year in a different school or district than at the beginning of the year. To achieve financial stability, our district needs a sustainable, secure funding source to help restore these critical positions.

Currently, less than one half of our students reach graduation and less than half of our graduates go on to college. To help ensure the success of students, our district has implemented a College and Career Academy, also known as “R.O.A.R. -- Revitalizing Our Academic Responsibilities” through career pathways.

This program introduces students at every level (K-12) to various academic, extracurricular and work-related activities consistent with their interests and scholastic aptitudes. Career paths include science, technology, engineering, mathematics, healthcare and others.

We also initiated our GEAR-UP Program, an assessment and counseling program that helps guide our current 7<sup>th</sup> grade cohort to career pathways. Our school district needs sustainable funding to maintain quality educational programming for all students to remain in school and succeed over the course of their educational experience and reach graduation.

**Keeping Our Veteran Teachers:**

Recent pay and benefit cuts for our faculty have contributed to a 25% annual turnover rate. Teachers, trained and knowledgeable about urban school education have left for better-paying jobs, taking with them the experience needed to help close the Harrisburg student achievement gap that we are mandated to attain. A more reliable funding formula will assure our district of the funds needed to maintain a trained and well-developed faculty and workforce.

In closing, the Harrisburg School District requests this Commission to strongly consider our district's unique characteristics and needs during your deliberations:

- **Our diverse cultures and community**
- **Our need for greater access to school readiness programs**
- **Enhancing student attendance and safety**
- **The need for strong student support services**
- **Robust and relevant programming and support to improve graduation rates and job readiness**
- **Recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers**

**To be schools that teach, we must have sustainable, basic education funding NOW! Thank you.**

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