

Comments to the Senate Majority Policy Committee
Dr. Jim Scanlon
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Good afternoon. My name is Jim Scanlon, superintendent of the West Chester Area School District for the past 11 years, a district of 12,100 students covering 75 square miles, and instructing a population of families where 38 different languages are spoken. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today and thank members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee; including Chairman Argall, Senator Langerholc, and Senator Killion, who represents the West Chester Area School District. I have known Senator Killion for twelve years, and have worked with him on many educational initiatives to support our students and parents.

Welcome to Rustin High School for this hearing today.

I am in my 22nd year as a public school superintendent, which includes work in rural, suburban, and urban schools. I am an active member of the Pa Association of School Administrators (PASA), and have been asked by the Executive Director, Dr. Mark Dirocco, to represent PASA today. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with our legislators as we all work at a furious pace to try to find a way to safely open our schools next month. Superintendents from around the state have been collaborating, sharing plans, ideas, and frustrations since the schools were closed in March. I believe my comments today reflect many of the challenges and frustrations being experienced throughout the state.

There are many people who want to speak today so let me begin to outline the incredible challenges school leaders have been facing this summer.

1. **School leaders are being asked to make medical decisions, yet none of us have medical backgrounds.** Changing and unclear guidance has divided communities. Instead of clear guidelines from our top medical officials, we receive guidance that provides “considerations” when opening schools. There are statements in the guidelines such as--- create six feet of social distancing “when feasible.” Since May 19 we have received six different sets of guidelines on how to open schools. School communities have been trying to discern the meaning of these guidelines and the discussions are literally fracturing our communities. Opinions about the virus and how it should be addressed are running along party lines. Rather than figuring out how to open school with six feet of social distancing, we are debating with our communities about whether three, four, or five feet is acceptable. We have asked the state to be specific – and they refuse. They insist this must be a local decision. The ONLY medical training I have is a first aid class. They are asking *educators* to decide what’s safe. Why are educators being asked to make decisions about public health? It seems reckless!
So, instead of spending the summer working through how best to implement a reopening model, we’ve had to spend the vast majority of our time on working through a public discernment process about which model to use --- knowing that we can’t operate at full capacity if we follow 6 feet. We’ve also had to spend an

enormous amount of time then explaining our decisions that are routinely criticized in an all-out social media assault. We are being forced to defend the castle from those who choose to storm it. Ultimately there are no good decisions and each district has been literally left on its own to choose one – with no support from the state.

- 2. We are being asked to develop completely new and less than optimal educational models in a matter of weeks.** We've been told by the state that it's important to get students back to school, yet there is little support to help us to do so. We know the PA Department of Education has good intentions and have provided us with guidance that has changed on a periodic basis, a template for a Health and Safety plan that we must submit to the state, and little else. We have been largely on our own to work through the extreme complexities of moving to a hybrid schedule or a virtual schedule.

Administrative teams have been literally working around the clock, 7 days a week, to build entirely new systems, develop training for staff, figure out how to make a socially distanced and masked school day engaging and meaningful for students, and do this all when our teaching staff is on vacation and our parents are furious. It is a challenge we understand we must accept – but one that ultimately sets us up for failure. Students *will* fall behind. Anxiety *will* increase. Staff *will* burn out quickly. And who will be blamed? Local school districts. Smaller, wealthier school systems naturally have an advantage – they will naturally outperform larger, less affluent ones. And the divide will worsen. Who will be hurt the most? Our special education students, our English Language Learners, and our lower income students. This is a time for state and even national organizations to provide *meaningful* help and support, and to step up and remind the public that what is being asked of school districts is extreme and unrealistic. It is not reasonable. It is not optimal. This is a stop-gap pandemic solution. We need our legislators and leaders to remind our publics – this is not a failure of public education.

- 3. School districts are going to go bankrupt paying for this.** While all districts appreciate the work of the general assembly and governor to quickly approve federal CARES funding to the schools, it will only scratch the tip of the iceberg in paying for the costs. For example, West Chester received approximately \$1.2 million in relief funds, but because of our size we have considerable expenses. We purchased a six month supply of masks for every student and teacher. We got an excellent price at 40 cents per mask, but when you have to purchase 500,000, the total cost is \$200,000. We had to purchase 1:1 devices for our 2,700 K-2 students and at \$300 per device the total exceeds \$800,000. This doesn't include the extra cleaning supplies, hydroelectric sprayers, and additional teachers needed to reduce class sizes to meet social distancing guidelines. To prevent parents from fleeing to cyber-charter schools, we will need to spend approximately \$1.1 million to hire additional teachers for our online-cyber program. These expenses all add up quickly, and are coming at a time when revenues will be expected to fall for the upcoming budgets.

4. **Cyber charter schools need to be capped at level funding.** School districts were level funded by the general assembly and we appreciate that in a very challenging year. However, our demands for services have increased. For example-- in West Chester we have seen an increase in enrollment from private schools. This is something that occurs in a down economy. Parents have a more difficult time making tuition payments, so they enroll in public schools. We have to absorb those costs from our budget allocations. Charter cyber schools do not. If they get a new student, they get \$14,000 from WCASD for a regular ed. student and \$31,000 for a special education student.

In July, had 11 students withdraw from our schools to enroll in a cyber-charter. That cost our district \$154,000, or the equivalent of two teachers. We built our own cyber school to retain students. We had to hire teachers to do so. So far we have enrolled 420 elementary and 160 secondary students into our cyber program. For those 580 students we hired 15 teachers at a cost of \$1.1 million. If 580 students leave to attend a cyber-charter school, we would send tuition payments of \$8.1 million. Why are we able to educate the same number of students for \$7 million less than the cyber charters? Doesn't this tell you that they are not running their schools efficiently? What are they doing with the money? These are PRIVATE organizations that are being publicly funded. This will bankrupt school districts and a cap on tuitions collected needs to happen soon.

5. **There needs to be relief from liability for school boards and superintendents** – School boards have to approve plans on how to open schools. This means they are accountable if someone gets sick and dies. While it may be difficult to prove a staff member or student got sick at school, it is only a matter of time before a judge establishes a precedent decision in a court hearing. Hold-harmless legislation needs to pass.
6. **Parents are split on what to do.** The latest parent survey data in WACSD asked if parents preferred hybrid, cyber, or full in person education this fall. More than 8,000 parents completed the survey. 40% want hybrid, 40% want in person for all students, and 20% want cyber. No matter what our board chooses, at least 60% of the people won't be happy.
7. **There needs to be funding to subsidize childcare** – This is a huge problem for many working families. 20% of our parents and 25% of our teachers need childcare this fall if schools don't open completely. Many local churches have offered to open their child care centers but because they can only accept 50% of capacity, they can't generate enough tuition payments to be profitable. Thus, many remain closed. If there was a subsidy for daycares, they can help meet the void this fall, but it needs to happen As Soon as Possible in order for them to staff these programs.

These are some of the challenges being faced in every community in Pennsylvania. Thanks for listening. I hope some good comes from this hearing. Our students, our teachers, our staff, and our families are all asking for help