

Testimony of Brian Costello
Superintendent of Wilkes-Barre Area School District
September 13, 2023

Chair Phillips-Hill, Chair Sturla, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I have spent my life in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District. I was a student, I was a teacher, I was a principal, I was a curriculum director, and since 2016, I have been superintendent. With five other school districts, Wilkes-Barre Area joined the school funding lawsuit, and won.

I believe that all students can learn, and I am sure that the members of this commission share that belief. However, I am here today because Pennsylvania's unconstitutional school funding system does not allow districts like mine to provide our students with the resources they need to thrive.

Wilkes-Barre and its surroundings make up a proud community. We were one of the earliest centers of mining and industry in the United States. Today, with that industry largely gone, we are one of the poorest school districts in Pennsylvania. More than a quarter of city residents live in poverty, and 81 percent of our more than 7,500 students are economically disadvantaged.

As an educator, it is difficult coming to school every day, knowing that students want to succeed, while also knowing that you are unable to provide the necessary support for all of them to do so. Our students just need the opportunity to show what they can do, but to give them that chance, we need additional funding.

In the years following the great recession, Wilkes-Barre Area faced an operating deficit of around \$8 million a year. Soon after I took the helm as superintendent in 2016, we took draconian measures to bring expenses in line with our revenue. We cut all K-8 art classes, Family Consumer Science, Industrial Arts and laid off every librarian in the district. In all, we furloughed 37 teachers and more than 20 paraprofessionals.

It is absolutely heartbreaking to make choices that you know will negatively affect student learning. But districts like mine, without local wealth to draw from, are forced to choose between unacceptable options every school year. Our district ranks 487th out of 499 school districts in spending relative to our student's needs under the Fair Funding Formula.

That means our students need more support than students in most other districts do—intervention specialists, small group learning, guidance counselors, and more—but because state funding is insufficient, and local funding is unavailable, they have less.

Without enough teachers or one-on-one intervention staff, missed opportunities compound as our students move through school. We are able to offer AP Calculus, but by senior year, only a few students have developed the math ability to take this course.

At the start of the 2021 school year, we welcomed students to a new state-of-the-art comprehensive high school. We are proud of this beautiful facility, with many modern features, including specialized science equipment for our STEM Academy program. However, even this achievement for our district was born out of necessity, and brought deep tradeoffs.

Prior to the opening of our new high school, Wilkes-Barre Area had three. Each had been an anchor in its community, but each was in serious disrepair. The foundation of Meyers High School had shifted by about a foot, causing structural damage that needed to be fixed. Structural damage at Coughlin High School forced us to close large portions of the building, sending 9th and 10th graders to a nearby elementary school and crowding older students into an annex. In the final years of these buildings, we installed protective sheds above the entrances to protect students from their crumbling facades.

Fixing each of these buildings would have cost twice as much as the bond to finance our new high school. That bond costs around \$8.5 million per year in repayments. To fit this additional expense into the budget, we eliminated another 37 teaching positions. With federal pandemic emergency aid, we were able to temporarily bring back 13 of these teachers to decrease elementary class sizes.

But all told, our district has fewer teachers today than it did in 2014. Our STEM Academy helps prepare students for college and in-demand careers—but we only have three teachers to staff it, and we regularly have to turn away qualified students who want to participate.

Our high school is one building that I don't have to worry about. But in many of our other schools, we face major facilities issues. Kistler Elementary, like our old Meyers High School, borders the river, and its walls have cracks with an infrastructure that does not facilitate 21st century learners. That elementary school is also overcrowded—several rooms are divided in half with whiteboards and bookcases to accommodate multiple classes, and students who need occupational therapy receive it in a makeshift room that was once a storage closet.

A school funding system that lives up to the promise of our state constitution, and provides for a comprehensive, contemporary and effective public education in every community, would be a game-changer for our students and for Wilkes-Barre Area. I know that sufficient state funding for public education would make an enormous difference, because modest, but appreciated, recent increases in state funding already have.

Since 2021, Wilkes-Barre Area has received Level Up funding, a state supplement to the most underfunded school districts in Pennsylvania. We used this funding to temporarily bring back art classes and to establish a new Learning Academy for some of our 6th grade students at G.A.R Middle School, our school with the lowest academic performance. This program, modeled after medical education, allows our teachers to spend additional time every day working collaboratively to design specific learning strategies for individual students under the guidance of experienced master teachers. These master teachers are also able to provide ongoing instructional coaching, remediation, and enrichment.

After one year, we have already seen promising results from this program. Students in the Learning Academy have seen their PSSA reading scores increase. When compared to the previous year, there was a 148 percent increase in students testing at the proficient or advanced level in ELA.

It's not complicated: when you are able to invest in teaching and learning, students can achieve great things. This commission has an urgent task ahead of them: to build a public school funding system that meets the needs of students, a system where funding is no longer determined by a community's property values. While you are making these important decisions, I urge the members of this commission to think about the untapped potential of thousands of students in public schools like mine.

I know Wilkes-Barre Area. All my life, I have seen the incredible things we can achieve when we are given the chance. The court's decision is clear: every child can learn, and it is up to us to make this promise a reality in Pennsylvania public schools. Invest in the future of Pennsylvania, and let our students show you what they can do. Thank you.