

Testimony of David McAndrew
Superintendent of Panther Valley School District
September 13, 2023

Chair Phillips-Hill, Chair Sturla, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. Since 2020, I have been superintendent of Panther Valley School District. Our district is one of six that filed and won the school funding lawsuit.

We joined the case and won the case because our public school funding system makes it impossible for poor, rural communities like mine to provide the resources all our students need to succeed civically, academically and socially.

Each new school year, I am reminded just how hard our phenomenal teachers and staff are working to serve our students. But I am also reminded of all the ways the deck is stacked against these kids.

I've lived in the Panther Valley School District all my life. Our district serves four small towns in Carbon and Schuylkill Counties—Summit Hill, Lansford, Nesquehoning, and Coaldale. Each is a former mining community in the anthracite coal region, and two were founded as company towns.

Today, all have high levels of poverty. Within the last few years, two of our only remaining large businesses and employers have closed: Kovatch, a manufacturer of fire apparatuses and trucks, and Silberline Manufacturing. Many residents must travel long distances for jobs, and the biggest employers in our district are the nonprofit St. Luke's Hospital system and the school district itself.

Our students are incredibly resilient, they want to learn, and with support, they can achieve as much as kids in any other community. They also come to school with deep challenges, and too often, because of a school funding system that relies on local resources we cannot provide, we cannot give them all the support they need to overcome these challenges.

We currently serve about 2,000 students. Almost 23 percent of them require special education, and state funding has not even come close to keeping up with their need for additional support. A large majority of kids in our district are economically disadvantaged, and many have experienced trauma and need mental health support. Our ability to provide that support, however, is limited: our classroom teachers often have to play the role of school counselor or school social worker. Panther Valley runs a food pantry, funded by Second Harvest, and last month, 700 people used that service.

On top of that, our small district is growing fast—we added about 300 students in the last three years, mostly in elementary school.

We have been unable to hire the teachers and paraprofessionals to keep up. Our elementary school has class sizes of up to 28 students, often with no teacher's aides, even in kindergarten, where most students arrive with no pre-K experience. Class sizes in high school are up to 33 students. At any given time, 10 to 12 of our teachers are teaching classes that are outside of their certification. When we *are* able to afford to fill teaching positions, we must compete against neighboring districts who can offer significantly higher salaries—sometimes \$15,000 more a year.

Just retaining the teachers we have requires steep tradeoffs. To avoid deep staff cuts, we spent most of our one-time federal pandemic relief on salaries, foregoing investments in technology and facilities that other districts were able to make. But without this aid, we would have eliminated art, music, all paraprofessional positions, and many athletic programs.

Just like we need more teachers, we also desperately need more classrooms themselves. Our student body has exploded in a K-3 building that is 60 years old and has no additional space. It is not air conditioned, and it has a leaky roof, an outdated HVAC system, and a laundry list of repairs that has grown for decades.

Last week, temperatures were above 90 degrees, and I had a choice to make. I could either dismiss school early, causing our students to miss half a day of education, or keep school open through the afternoon in uncomfortable conditions for young children. I chose to keep school open for the full day, but either choice meant giving students less than they deserve. If my district had adequate resources, I would not have had to make that choice at all.

We are currently doing what we can to put aside money for a new building, because we have no other option. But that saving has consequences. Preparing to pay for a building we know our students need means that we must continue to tread water, making do with insufficient staff while our student population continues to grow.

Before leading Panther Valley, I spent most of my career as a kindergarten teacher and principal in Jim Thorpe, a significantly wealthier neighboring district. You can see the difference in wealth between our two communities as soon as you step into the classroom: small class sizes, up-to-date technology, assistant principals in every building, and more. I saw the difference that this support makes for their students and I know it would make a difference for mine.

Our local taxpayers try very hard to support our schools. But because our community is not wealthy, it is not enough—not even close. There is nowhere else for us to turn.

All of this is why I am here. To help you understand what the Court understood: that our kids deserve much more. So I ask this Commission to design a new, fair system, one with sufficient state funding, based on our students' potential, not on our community's wealth.

Sufficient funding would mean that all of our kids could learn in safe, modern buildings. It would mean fewer kindergarteners waiting for help from a teacher scrambling to manage 25 other kids by him or herself. It would mean high schoolers with access to everything they need to prepare to enter the 21st century workforce. These aren't wants. These are needs.

Panther Valley is my home. My parents live in the district, and I sent my children to school here. My neighbors have that underdog spirit—they know they have had to do more with less. They are fighters, and I came to lead this district so I could fight alongside our families and our students. That is why I came to Harrisburg to take the stand in the school funding trial, and why I am here today. What we are asking for, and what the state constitution and the Court has said our students deserve, is simple: a meaningful opportunity, and the essential resources to make that happen in every public school. Thank you.