



Testimony

Submitted on behalf of the
Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry

Before the:
House Education Committee

Presented by:
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Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Cutler, and honorable members of the House Education Committee, my name is Aaron Riggelman, and I am the Manager of Government Affairs for the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry. The PA Chamber is the largest, broad-based business advocacy association in Pennsylvania. We represent employers of all sizes, across all industry sectors throughout the Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania employers have a significant stake in our Commonwealth's education system. Today's students are tomorrow's business leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators, and skilled workforce. A strong, effective education system is critical for our economy to thrive. Employers also have a financial stake in our education system. In 2021, the Independent Fiscal Office reported that total property taxes (including school and municipal) paid by businesses in Pennsylvania totaled \$13.2 billion and accounted for 36 percent of the total business tax burden in Pennsylvania¹. As major investors in our education system, businesses care deeply about our schools and support policies that help Pennsylvania's children succeed and lead to a vibrant economy. Achieving these goals requires the participation of, and enhanced coordination among, stakeholders, including public schools, which must continue to review and improve the manner in which students are educated and prepared for the workforce, higher education, or whichever path they choose.

Pennsylvania's 21st-century economy increasingly requires individuals entering or participating in the workforce to obtain specific skills, training, and, at a minimum, fundamental education, much of which is provided through our public school system. Businesses know how

¹ http://www.ifo.state.pa.us/download.cfm?file=Resources/Documents/SD_Prop_Tax_Update_Aug_2022.pdf

important it is that our education system produces students equipped with a wide array of employable skills. The PA Chamber supports a robust education system where success is measurable through rigorous standards and schools are empowered to hold themselves accountable for outcomes.

Pennsylvania's Current Position

Funding is, of course, an important part of the discussion. The Legislature has made historic investments in public schools, with a nearly 60 percent increase in total K-12 spending over the last decade. Evaluating per-pupil funding specifically from the state, Pennsylvania ranks 21st in the nation, about 10 percent above the national average. When considering all sources of spending, including federal and local, Pennsylvania jumps to the 9th highest per-pupil spending in the nation, or 27 percent above the national average². Additionally, according to the National Education Association, Pennsylvania has the 10th highest starting teacher salary in the country and the 6th highest top salary for teachers with a bachelor's degree³.

Unfortunately, these relatively robust investments do not appear to correlate with student outcomes when considered in the aggregate. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports Pennsylvania students as roughly average in math and reading proficiency, with little progress—and in some cases regression—in the last five years⁴.

Additionally, Pennsylvania ranks worse than 27 states in average SAT scores⁵. As we begin a

² <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>

³ [https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank/teacher#:~:text=The%20national%20average%20public%20school,592\)%20at%20the%20low%20end](https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank/teacher#:~:text=The%20national%20average%20public%20school,592)%20at%20the%20low%20end)

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/state/>

⁵ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/sat-scores-by-state>

conversation today about student outcomes, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that without measurable metrics like those cited above, we wouldn't be able to compare our school success to our other states. It's for this reason; I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Pennsylvania's business community regarding the state's education system and how we can ensure our education system is one based on outcomes that are measurable year over year.

Need for Outcomes Based Accountability

While Pennsylvania invests more and more year over year in K-12 education, it is clear that increased funding alone is not the sole determinant of student outcomes. To maximize the return on this investment, we must first ensure that resources are being used effectively to drive measurable progress in student achievement. Accountability is not an option but an imperative, both for current spending and any conversations of increasing spending with a focus on aligning funding with outcomes that prepare students for success in both higher education and the workforce. Without clear metrics and transparency, additional funding risks perpetuating inadequacies rather than addressing the root causes of underperformance.

An important part of understanding, in real time, student progress and the return on taxpayers' investment is through testing student knowledge. The age-old ritual of school tests has perhaps never been as unpopular as it seems to be today. Yet school tests – particularly standard assessments that allow comparisons among students in different schools, districts and regions – are a necessary tool for tracking growth and ensuring students are obtaining a baseline knowledge. While student preparedness cannot be adequately assessed solely through standardized tests, and the subjects on which they focus, they serve as a minimum foundation

upon which other skills and academic proficiencies are built. The PA Chamber supports standardized assessments, such as the PSSAs and Keystone Exams, which should be viewed as a floor for student knowledge attainment and one of many tools for measuring opportunity gaps within our education system.

Standardized tests, of course, only represent one outcomes-based measurement tool that can be used to evaluate the success or lack thereof of our school system. The Future Ready PA Index, a topic of this hearing, is a prime example of the kinds of tools that provide policymakers and advocates a transparent and accessible view of student outcomes. Policymakers should avoid narrowing the tools available to evaluate student progress by eliminating assessments in favor of a dashboard (such as the Future Ready PA Index) or vice versa but rather look for ways to expand the metrics we can use to evaluate our public education system. When making decisions, having more data points is always beneficial, as it provides a clearer, more comprehensive picture to inform effective and well-rounded policies.

Data based student achievement metrics equip us with the tools to evaluate whether investments in education are translating into real improvements, such as higher proficiency rates, better graduation outcomes, and stronger workforce readiness. By setting clear expectations for performance, Pennsylvania can identify what schools are finding success and which are not, allowing lawmakers to identify and help address schools and educators who have shown an inability to achieve positive student outcomes.

What Employers Need

The ability of Pennsylvania's business community and economy to succeed depend in large part on the effectiveness of our K-12 education system. When measuring student success, policymakers should consider what skills and abilities Pennsylvania employers are looking for? Employers in Pennsylvania are seeking a workforce equipped with a blend of academic, technical and basic social and behavioral skills to meet the demands of our evolving economy. While proficiency in core subjects such as mathematics and reading remain foundational, employers increasingly emphasize the importance of skills that go beyond math and reading. These skills are essential for navigating a quickly changing job market that require skills that are transmissible between specific jobs.

Soft skills such as the ability to work with colleagues, problem solving, critical thinking, and time management are also highly valued by employers. Businesses across the Commonwealth report that these attributes are often as important as academic achievement in determining an employee's success. Additionally, employers place great emphasis on employability skills such as punctuality, responsibility, and professionalism. These skills may seem basic, but they are critical for success in the workplace.

How We Equip Students with These Skills

Our public school system plays an important role in helping to instill these values in our students both during the normal cadence of the school day, but also by thinking of creative opportunities to diversify the academic offerings and experiences for all students. Schools can play a key role in fostering these attributes by incorporating project-based learning, real-world problem-solving, and opportunities for students to engage in partnerships with employers.

Youth employment also provides invaluable opportunities for students to build the skills that will be necessary to eventually transition successfully into the workforce. By working part-time jobs during high school, students gain hands-on experience that hone the very skills that employers demand in any career. These jobs are often the first opportunities for young people to learn how to collaborate with coworkers and follow instructions, to be punctual and professional. Early exposure to the work environment helps our young citizens develop a strong work ethic and adaptability, preparing them for future employment. When paired with academic learning, teen employment bridges the gap between school and career preparation, equipping students with the experience and skills that employers value highly in entry-level candidates. We hope lawmakers will pursue a legislative agenda that encourages youth employment and the retention and creation of the jobs for which these young Pennsylvanians are qualified.

Lastly, career and technical exposure in K-12 education is essential for preparing students to meet the demands of the modern workforce. By introducing students to career pathways early, schools can help them discover their interests, develop marketable skills, and better understand opportunities in fields like healthcare, manufacturing, and the skilled trades. Partnerships with local employers that provide demonstrations or site visits offer students a tangible understanding of workplace expectations and career opportunities. Providing this exposure early in K-12 allows students to make informed decisions about post-secondary education or entering the workforce directly, helping to reduce skills gaps and position Pennsylvania's economy for long-term growth.

Preparing Students for Tech Advancement

As Pennsylvania works to attract and retain large-scale investments in emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, advanced computing, and data centers, the strength of our talent pipeline is increasingly a deciding factor. These investments bring high-quality jobs, long-term tax base growth, and significant secondary economic benefits only if employers are confident that Pennsylvania can supply a workforce with the foundational skills required to support them. While not every student will work directly in AI or at a data center, these industries depend on workers with strong math and literacy skills, problem-solving ability, and adaptability, skills that must be developed early and measured consistently. An education system focused on outcomes, transparency, and real-world readiness sends a clear signal to employers that Pennsylvania is serious about competing for the jobs and investments shaping the next generation of our economy.

Increasingly, employers and site selectors are using education and workforce data, including graduation rates, math proficiency, credential attainment, and postsecondary alignment, as part of their investment decisions. States that can clearly demonstrate student outcomes and workforce readiness have a competitive advantage, while states that cannot risk being passed over regardless of how much they spend.

Conclusion

I thank this committee again for the opportunity to testify today and recognizing employers as key stakeholders in our education system. Lawmakers have the opportunity to elevate Pennsylvania's status as a national leader and educational trend-setter, where policymakers and educators focus more on student outcomes, rather than financial inputs.

Where rigorous standards and a system of accountability help Pennsylvania children live up to their potential. Where students and families are empowered to choose the educational path that best suits their unique needs. And where our business community and state economy flourish with an ever-expanding pool of home-grown talent Thank you again and I am happy to answer any questions.