

Testimony to City Council

Marjorie G. Neff, Chair of School Reform Commission

School District of Philadelphia

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Good morning, Council President Clarke and members of City Council. My name is Marjorie Neff and I am the Chair of the School Reform Commission (“SRC”) of the School District of Philadelphia (“District”). Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning.

I am joined today by my fellow commissioners Bill Green, Feather Houstoun, Farah Jimenez, and Sylvia Simms. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge them and thank them for their critical service to the students and families of Philadelphia.

I would also like to acknowledge the support from City Council to the School District over the past several years. Without your help, our current situation would have certainly been worse. Nonetheless, we find ourselves at a critical juncture and action by the Philadelphia City Council is urgently needed.

I am honored to speak to you today in my new role as chair of the SRC. While this is a new position for me, the District budget process is a familiar one. The School District of Philadelphia has been my home for the past 38 years. I have served as a principal of two schools, taught many classes and raised my children in Philadelphia school communities. I have experienced the budget process – and budget cutbacks – as a teacher, school leader and parent.

It is with this background of deep and varied experiences that I stand before you today with new hope. Following the devastating cuts and incredible sacrifices of recent years, our schools are now finally positioned to move out of this dark time. Our fiscal house is now in order. We will for the first time in 4 years end this fiscal year with a small surplus. Getting to this place required not spending beyond our means and, as a result, making heartbreaking budget cuts needed to put our district back on solid financial ground.

In addition, through Dr. Hite’s leadership, we are armed with Action Plan 3.0, a full and thorough plan to move us forward. New dollars will be spent boldly and purposefully. However, we cannot move forward without your help.

The increased revenues we request today are urgently needed to provide our students with the means to pursue brighter futures. Additional funding will open the door to higher education for many students. It will expand high-quality Career and Technical Education programs, such as

our soon-to-open Advanced Manufacturing Center at Ben Franklin High School, and enable more students to access language immersion programs, like the one at Southwark Elementary School. It will broaden supports for students who are struggling and expand alternative education programs through our new Opportunity Network. More funds will allow the District to increase our pre-kindergarten enrollment and provide more students with afterschool enrichment activities. We can hire more school-based staff and expand small-group instruction, positive school climate programs, and teacher professional development. We can provide needed supplies, teaching and learning materials, and technology. The school-by-school budget books provide a thorough overview of school leadership team priorities with additional city and state funding.

From firsthand experience, I can tell you that the hard work and sacrifices of our teachers, principals, families and students have held our schools together over these last few years. We cannot and should not ask our schools to give up anything more. To put it simply, there is nothing left to cut.

I trust that our collective aspirations for Philadelphia schools involve more than just merely treading water. On behalf of our students, teachers and families, I join my fellow commissioners and the District leadership team in asking you to help move Philadelphia schools toward a brighter future.

Thank you.