

City Council Testimony May 9, 2018
by Dr. William Hite, Superintendent, the School District of Philadelphia

“There is a price to a good education, but the price of doing nothing is far higher.”

I could not have said it better myself, which is why I yielded my time this morning to City-Wide Student Government President Alfredo Pratico. I would also like to thank Zuha Mutan, Kalyse Ecker and Khalid Abogourin for being here and for their work on our City-Wide Student Government effort.

Good morning, President Clarke and City Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the School District’s budget for fiscal year 2018-19 and the District’s five-year plan.

In the last few days we have been shown the price of decades of disinvestment in our public school buildings. The aged condition of our schools is not new nor is it a surprise. In 2016 we hired expert engineers and architects to identify needed updates and replacements across our school buildings, half of which are over 70 years old. Over \$4.5 billion in needed repairs were identified.

Alfredo also spoke about the impact of disinvestment on his academic experience - a slashed teaching staff, no money for basics like books and supplies - and he called out the unfair impact of cuts on schools that did not have outside resources to lessen the blow.

I am here today, however, not to complain about the past nor to lay blame. Rather, I am here to explain how investments in our schools are making a difference now, and to state clearly for the record that our children, our teachers and principals, and our schools need every dollar that is being proposed in the new budget - and we need more.

It has been an honor to serve as the Superintendent of public schools for this city for the last 6 years. I want to thank you for the trust you have shown in my leadership and for the many successful efforts you have made to bring more resources to our schools - like the \$400 million in additional revenues. These monies became the foundation of our investment plan which has touched every school in the district.

Your leadership also has been key to returning the District to local control. And, with that control we know comes an even greater level of responsibility to our children. Our duty as civic leaders is to provide our children with a quality education.

Over the past few years, we have worked hard and made significant progress. We have set clear goals around college and career readiness, early literacy and fiscal stability and we are seeing the positive outcomes of our efforts.

Early literacy is one of our anchor goals and an area for targeted investment because students who are not skilled readers reading by fourth grade are less likely to succeed. We have provided training for kindergarten through third grade teachers, made reading a 2-hour part of every early grade schedule, provided onsite early literacy coaches in every school, and modernized 70 early literacy classrooms in schools with low literacy rates.

These investments are paying off. The percentage of students reading on grade level by third grade increased by 5% and surpassed state gains with more than 900 more students reading at the highest level, and 1,500 fewer students reading at the lowest. And, with the investments proposed we can multiply these improvements so that every child in the city has excellent reading skills by 4th grade.

Last year we modernized 70 Kindergarten through 2nd grade classrooms to further support our literacy initiative. With consistent recurring revenues, next year we will expand our classroom modernization program to more than 160 Pre-K to 3rd grade classrooms across eleven additional schools by:

- Repainting classrooms and adding new lighting;
- Purchasing hundreds of books for each classroom;
- Buying chairs, stools, tables and carpets;
- Providing thousands of hours of teacher training and coaching; and
- Buying headphones, iPads, and smartboards.

We are excited that these upgrades will affect over 5,800 additional children throughout the city. These modern classrooms must become the rule, not the exception. Unfortunately, even with the proposed funding, there will be more than 45,000 children in over 1,800 classrooms that are still too dark, still too cramped and still with insufficient technology and learning materials.

We know what investment in early literacy achieves and it is a price we must be willing to pay.

Increasing high school graduation and ensuring every graduate is ready for a college or a career is another area targeted for investment. So far, basic investments in our high schools have already created increases in our high school graduation rate -- from 52% in 2006 to 67% in 2017 -- an increase of 15% points. That's noteworthy improvement as we aim to reach our 5-year goal of 80% of students graduating on-time ready for college or career.

We are now making significant investments targeted to 9th grade because we know that students who successfully complete 9th grade with the right credits and good grades are more likely to graduate on-time.

The investments are showing results from increased attendance to improved school climate and student behavior. With the investments planned in our budget, we will create eight more 9th grade academies across the city. Ninth grade academies provide students with supports like time to meet with an advisor, and college and career counseling services. They also help students to track their attendance, grades and credits to make sure they are on the path to graduation.

We will also invest in training for high school teachers, classroom improvements like modern science labs, and creating more advanced course and college credit options.

We know that a quality education comes at a price. It requires investments, and it requires resources. We have shown that we are trustworthy and responsible stewards of public dollars, and, with your help we have created fiscal stability. We are entering our fourth consecutive year of balanced budgets, Moody's upgraded the District's bond rating for the first time since 2010 and we preserved hundreds of millions of dollars in state funding that were slated to be taken away. And, we spend funds on the things that create drastic improvements for children -- only 3% of our budget goes to administrative costs.

You have had the opportunity to support and appreciate firsthand the limitless potential of our students. Maybe you witnessed the electric energy at the Liacouras Center when former First Lady Michelle Obama spoke to our seniors as part of College Signing Day. Or visited a neighborhood school where members of the Super Bowl-winning Philadelphia Eagles football team were encouraging students to attend school and stay active. Or maybe you watched a musical performance, visited a science fair, or sat in on a student presentation.

Now is a moment for us all to work together. We must do whatever we can to secure the revenues critical to creating sweeping improvements in all schools for our children, our teachers and our school communities. They deserve nothing less.