

City Council Testimony May 14, 2019

Dr. Joyce Wilkerson, School Board President
Dr. William Hite, Superintendent, the School District of Philadelphia

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JOYCE WILKERSON

Good morning, Council President Clarke and City Council Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. Before I turn it over to Superintendent Hite, I want to acknowledge my fellow board members who are here today and share a few short remarks on behalf of the Board of Education. With me this morning are Board members Julia Danzy, Leticia Egea Hinton, Mallory Fix Lopez, Lee Huang, and Dr. Christopher McGinley.

The FY2019-2020 Lump Sum Statement and Five-Year Plan unanimously approved by the Board last month is not simply an exercise in dollars and cents. It is a thoughtful and strategic investment plan that builds on the prior investments and expands to new ones in the best interests of our students. It is a statement about what our School Board and District leadership believe is most important to continue the progress we have made over the past several years:

- PROGRESS improving schools across our City
- PROGRESS improving student achievement
- PROGRESS restoring needed supports to our schools
- AND PROGRESS making improvements to support safer, cleaner and healthier schools for
students and staff.

As the video highlights, our investment plan IS WORKING. While we can ALL take pride in this shared accomplishment, we must also acknowledge that there is much more work to do to provide all students with the educational supports and opportunities they need to thrive. I thank this City Council for helping to bring much-needed resources to our schools, and ask each of you for your continued support of our investment strategy. Our students deserve nothing less.

At this time, I yield to Superintendent Hite for his testimony.

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DR. HITE

Thank you Board President Wilkerson. Good morning, President Clarke and City Council Members. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today.

Yesterday, I was in Harrisburg with my urban superintendent colleagues from across the state advocating for the many needs of our public schools. I talked about how Pennsylvania's urban school districts are responsible for educating 1 of every 7 children in our public schools. And as the largest School District in the State and one of the largest in the country, we must lead the way in graduating students today with the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to be the workers, business owners, leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

As you saw in the video and as Board President Wilkinson stated, we are making steady progress. We have set clear goals, prioritized investments to support these goals and are now seeing the positive outcomes of our efforts.

Early literacy is one of our anchor goals and an area for targeted investment because reading is the foundation for all learning. Students who are not skilled readers by fourth

grade are less likely to succeed. Since 2014, 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, created leveled-libraries in every K-3 classroom, and modernized 223 early literacy classrooms in 19 schools with updated technology and furniture.

To share a first-hand perspective on how these investments are making a difference for teachers and students, I introduce Asmeret Easley, an Early Literacy Lead at Overbrook Educational Center.

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Asmeret Easley gives her testimony

Thank you, Asmeret. What Asmeret has described is happening in K-3 literacy classrooms in every school across our District. And it's paying off. Since 2015, the percent of eight year olds reading on or above grade level has increased three percentage points and the number of third graders scoring at the lowest level on the PSSA assessments has decreased by six percentage points. Our students' three-year academic growth rates in literacy are up across every tested grade level and are outpacing the state average in nearly all tested grade levels.

Our FY2019-2020 Investment Plan builds on this success by expanding our K-3 early literacy model to grades four and five. We know what investment in early literacy achieves and they are investments we must be willing to make.

Ensuring every graduate is ready for a college or a career is another core area of investment. So far, basic investments to restore more than 1,700 teachers and support staff positions in schools, provide more advanced placement and dual enrollment opportunities for students, ensure counselors and nurses support every school, and add

more CTE programs in high schools have already helped to increase our high-school graduation rate for three years in a row -- from 74% in 2014 to 79% in 2018.

To share how SDP's investments have made a difference in her high school experience, I introduce Doha Ibrahim, a junior at Abraham Lincoln High School..

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Doha gives her testimony

Thank you Doha. You are a shining example of the possibility for EVERY student we serve. But we know that realizing that possibility for EVERY student means we must do more to support the needs of all of our diverse learners.

That's why our recommended budget includes 30 additional teachers for English Language Learners, more dual enrollment course offerings, 10 new college-and career-readiness coordinators, increased supports for students with disabilities and students off-track for graduation, and more behavioral health staff, counselors and nurses.

A final topic I want to talk about is our facilities.

The aged condition of our schools is not new nor is it a surprise. Half of our buildings are over 70 years old, with some more than 120 years old. An assessment by expert engineers and architects valued the needed updates and replacements across our school buildings at \$4.5 billion.

However, we should not dwell on the magnitude of that estimate. What is most important is that we reflect on what we have been able to do with our existing resources and determine how best to provide reasonable, sustainable annual funding that will finally resolve critical operational and environmental issues in our school buildings.

Since 2014, our Operations Division has been making steady progress to support safer, cleaner and healthier learning environments for students. This includes:

- \$395 million to renovate classrooms and modernize basic building infrastructure
- nearly \$1 million in asbestos abatement
- 32 high-priority elementary schools will be made lead safe by the first day of school this fall and an additional 80 elementary schools will be assessed and stabilized for lead hazards this summer.
- 112 new cleaning positions and more rigorous cleaning standards that are monitored daily
- 882 state-of-the-art hydration stations installed across all schools
- humidity sensors in 31 targeted schools to monitor and proactively prevent mold

We'll also be expanding next year, at up to twenty schools, our guaranteed energy savings projects to reduce utilities expenses and promote renewable energy sources.

These investments -- from both our operating and capital budgets -- are valued at over \$450M.

While we are fully committed to these efforts, there is much more we could do with additional resources to build on our momentum and put many of our fundamental, high-risk building challenges in the rear view mirror.

- For \$75 million, we can completely repaint and make all of our schools "Lead Safe" over the next five years.
- An additional \$40 million would allow us to remove the risk of harmful asbestos over the next four years.
- \$140 million of new resources is required to make the electrical upgrades needed to support classroom technology and add air conditioners in over 2,000 classrooms

The vision we ALL embrace is for every student to have access to a great school, close to where they live. I'm proud to say we are making progress toward this vision ...but there is much more we must do together to turn this vision into reality.

We know that a quality education requires focus, commitment and prioritization by all. 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 achieved fiscal stability. We are entering our fifth consecutive year of balanced budgets. We've regained our Investment Grade credit rating for the first time since 1977. And, we spend the majority of our dollars on the things that are MOST important for student success.

I want to close by stating clearly for the record that our schools need EVERY dollar that is being proposed in the new budget - and we need more. I'm committed to doing my part both here and in Harrisburg. NOW IS THE TIME for all of us to work together to secure the funding critical to create sweeping improvements in every school, for every child in every Philadelphia community.