



**Comments Regarding
Alternative Approach to School District Funding
Called “Equity First”**

**Presented to the House Education Committee
May 26, 2016**

Good morning Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Eric Eshbach. I serve as superintendent of the Northern York County School District and chair the Legislative Committee of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). PASA members include school district superintendents and other chief school leaders who serve across our state. I am here today speaking on behalf of PASA.

Members of the Basic Education Funding Commission heard testimony from more than 115 superintendents, school directors, researchers, business representatives and parents during public hearings held throughout the year-long study and public outreach process. The Commission also surveyed 125 school districts and collected detailed data from 25 others. It was clear from the testimony and data that Pennsylvania’s funding system for its public schools is broken and has been for more than two decades.

PASA believes two factors are the root cause of this problem.

First is the lack of a consistently applied and data-informed basic education funding formula. Since the ESBE (Equalized Subsidy for Basic Education) formula was discontinued in 1991, the distribution of basic education funding has been changed and manipulated nearly every year to benefit certain school districts. More than 30 different factors have been used to distribute funds since 1991.

The second factor is the relatively low share of funding provided by the state to support the total cost of operating its public schools. At about 35 percent, the state share of public school funding ranks 46th among the 50 states. This level of funding, regardless of what formula is used to distribute the funds, cannot overcome the large disparities in local wealth to correct

the vast inequities in funding available to districts. As you have likely heard, Pennsylvania has the largest spending gap between its wealthy and poor districts of any state in the country.

PASA strongly supports the use of the Basic Education Funding Formula developed and recommended by the bipartisan Basic Education Funding Commission to distribute all new basic education funds going forward. PASA believes the formula, combined with an increased state investment, provides the best pathway forward to correct the disparities in funding among school districts.

The Basic Education Funding Commission formula removes politics from state school funding decisions by directing money to school districts based on objective factors, such as student enrollment, the needs of students enrolled in district schools, population sparsity, school district wealth and capacity to raise local revenues.

With this fair education funding formula, we can take an important step toward the goal of ensuring ALL students will have a fair shot at academic success, no matter where they live.

According to information posted on the *supportequityfirst.org* website, the alternative approach to school district funding is based on the premise that 320 school districts are overfunded and 180 school districts are underfunded.

We believe this premise is wrong.

PASA believes, that except for a handful, school districts do not have sufficient resources to provide the programs and services necessary to support every student to meet or exceed state mandated levels of achievement.

As proposed in the alternative approach to school district funding, running the current appropriation through the formula and comparing that amount against what districts currently receive is not a proper benchmark to determine sufficiency. Rather, sufficiency is properly determined through research-based studies to determine what the actual costs are to perform the instructional programs and provide the supports necessary for every student to become proficient in meeting state academic standards and comply with other state mandates.

We strongly believe that all but a handful of school districts are underfunded and support the proposal by the Campaign for Fair Education Funding that state funding needs to increase over a six- to eight-year period to make ALL school districts, not just a select group, whole.

The alternative approach to school district funding would turn back the clock to the system of funding schools, one in which school districts would not have a predictable basis to estimate funding levels from year-to-year. It creates two classes of school districts: those eligible to receive “reparation” payments and those ineligible to receive the additional funding, without the basis for that determination having any correlation to the actual needs of each school district.

PASA does not support abandoning the excellent work of the Basic Education Funding Commission. We applaud action by the House yesterday to approve House Bill 1552 to codify the formula into the Public School Code and urge the Committee and General Assembly to use the formula going forward while increasing the amount of state investment in its public schools.

This is the proper pathway to providing equitable school funding to schools across the state.

Thank you.