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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Roundtable

Save Our Schools: Rural Education

Wednesday, August 2, 2023 | 10 a.m.
Representative Paul Takac

OPENING REMARKS

10:00a.m. Rep. Paul Takac, D-Centre

PANELIST INTRODUCTIONS

10:05 a.m. Amanda Hetrick, Superintendent of Schools
Forest Area School District

Dr. Jacquelyn Martin, Superintendent of Schools
Keystone Central School District

Kurt Lynch, Director of Career and Technical Education
Keystone Central School District

Dr. Karen Eppley, Faculty Affiliate, Center on Rural Education and
Communities
Penn State University

James Orichosky, Director of Elementary
Bald Eagle Area School District

Tracy Boone, Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Bald Eagle Area School District

Jack Tobias, Director of Secondary
Bald Eagle Area School District

Q & A WITH LEGISLATORS

Remarks and Testimony can be found by scanning the QR Code below:

Written Testimony for the House Democratic Policy Committee
July 31, 2023
Amanda Hetrick, Superintendent Forest Area School District

My name is Amanda Hetrick and I am beginning my twelfth year as Superintendent of the Forest Area School District. I have spent 35 years working in education with 28 of those years being in an administrative capacity. All of my experience has been in rural Pennsylvania school districts in Crawford, Warren, Forest, Venango, and Elk Counties. My grandfather was born in Neilltown in Forest County, so I consider myself to be vested both personally and professionally in the success of the Forest Area Schools. I have been invited to speak to you today about the issues that are facing rural schools now and in future years if intervention does not occur.

Forest Area School District comprises all of Forest County and small portions of Venango and Elk Counties and is considered part of the Appalachian Region. The district is just over 500 square miles with a student population of approximately 400. The Allegheny National Forest, which occupies 50% of our district's area, divides our attendance area right down the center and creates significant transportation and communication issues. It is only within the past fifteen years that we have had reliable Internet at our schools and many of our students' homes still have only inadequate access or no access at all. Forest County has around 7,000 residents with about 2,000 of those being inmates of the state prison located in Marienville. Our population swells in the summer months and during the hunting and fishing seasons since over 75% of our dwellings are seasonal residences.

We serve our students in two PreK-12 school buildings located almost 30 miles apart. Our student demographics reflect 22% special education, 11% homeless, 63.52% economically disadvantaged, 19.6% census poor and 34.8% in child poverty. The median income of our families is \$43,958 per year as compared to a state average of \$67,587 per year. The Forest County per capita income is \$20,696 as compared to a statewide average of \$37,725 making us one of the poorest counties in Pennsylvania.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about our rural schools and the communities that support them. I'd like to briefly address a number of areas for your consideration. These are in no particular order of importance, but are all things that I believe are of significance to rural schools and communities.

Mental Health

Mental Health services are not readily available within our community. Because our county population is small, it is not cost effective for many agencies to operate services locally. Those

who do operate in or near our community often have waiting lists as a result of a lack of personnel and the number of people who need services.

County funding provides the Student Assistance Program which has been in place in schools since 1989. That allows us to triage and identify and refer students to appropriate services, but many of our families lack reliable transportation and so following up with those recommendations can be difficult. We actually went to the time and trouble to have both buildings licensed as outpatient mental health clinics so that a local agency could come in and provide services to students and while that has been helpful, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining therapists has meant that students have experienced several different therapists or times when no therapist was available at all.

The mental health funding provided by the ARP ESSER money and the state legislature has allowed us to employ an elementary school counselor and a school social worker which have helped to address immediate needs. We have also been able to provide social and emotional curricular materials for the school counselors and the classroom teachers to use to teach social skills and help students develop skills in conflict resolution and problem solving.

Unfortunately, some of the mental health issues that we are seeing in our classrooms go far beyond the skills of our teachers, paraprofessionals and even our newly added counselor and social worker. These problems are appearing in students as young as age four since we offer Pre-K in our public schools because there is no child care available in Forest County. Last year, within our schools, we performed 24 suicide screenings and 34 threat assessments, which may not sound like a lot to some of you, but for us are 6% and 8.5% of our student population respectively. Many of these students are referred to crisis centers. If there is an open bed, then they are hospitalized to manage the crisis, but many times we have spent several days on the phone seeking open beds for students only to have them returned home without treatment if nothing is available. For those that do access care, there is often not enough support when they are discharged to allow for long-term healing and so the cycle repeats itself.

Classroom teachers have been reporting that the isolation caused by the pandemic has harmed social development of children and many of them are about two years behind in terms of problem solving and reasoning ability. This means that they are not capable of solving developmental issues that we would usually not even consider for a particular age group. It also eats away at the child's self image creating both a greater number and more complex mental health situations.

We need to take steps to improve the pipeline for more mental health workers, consider the rates for services that are paid to the providers, provide funding and support for services to be delivered at schools so a more immediate response can be provided to student needs.

Special Education

At 22%, our special education rates remain higher than the goal set for us by the state which is 15%, but those numbers are largely out of our control as we continue to see the numbers of students with social-emotional, developmental, and learning disabilities increase in both number and severity. As a district, we have made a commitment to educate our students in our local schools whenever it is possible so that the students have the opportunity to learn with their non-disabled peers and integrate themselves into the community where they will live and work following graduation.

Providing appropriate services for those students with disabilities can be very expensive, especially for high needs, low incidence conditions. For example, in a district like Forest Area, we might have one student who is legally blind and requires vision services. Vision services often require specialized equipment and assistive technology. In addition, a vision specialist must either be hired by the school district or services must be purchased from the IU. Often, the blind student may also require mobility services and special transportation. That can amount to a cost of over \$70,000 for that student.

Some of our neediest students may not be potty trained, are non-verbal and lack psycho-motor skills which put their safety at risk without constant supervision. While there are classes and programs out of the district that are set up for these students, it is often not in their best interests to make the 3-4 hour round trip each day to get to those classes. We have little choice, but to make arrangements for those students to be educated in our local schools which may require additional staffing and supportive services that we would not usually need.

When students are a little older, it may be most appropriate to transport them to classrooms hosted by neighboring school districts or our Intermediate Unit for specific programs. That adds a level of cost for tuition and transportation and there may or may not be a corresponding decrease in local expenditures since often the staffing and services we are providing would still be needed to support other existing students.

Many of our students with special education needs come from families with low socio-economic status and their parents and/or grandparents are not prepared to meet their needs. That combined with the lack of child care facilities means that a lot of them are left in less than ideal situations and are often raised by television or video games instead of caring adults who are reading appropriate material to them, playing with them and speaking to them in ways that will expand their vocabulary. Their behavior is often inappropriate and sometimes even violent toward

themselves or others. Each year it seems, these students get younger and younger and it is more difficult for the teachers to concentrate on education when they are constantly managing behaviors.

It might be helpful to commission a study of the costs and services required for special education students as well as highlighting best practices throughout the state to ensure that funding is provided as equitably as possible. In addition, we need to emphasize our youngest learners since often doing intervention at an early age can prevent a child from later being identified for special education services.

Curriculum and Assessment

Our rural schools face many challenges in delivering a strong curriculum and performing competitively on state assessments. One of the biggest problems is that the number of students per grade level is small and so it is difficult to deliver a variety of courses or to attain statistically significant results on state assessments.

We do not offer any Honors, AP or IB classes since it would not be practical to schedule those courses for such small numbers. At Forest Area, we rely on dual enrollment courses to help fill that gap for our students, but we are not always able to access the classes that students need at the time of day or in the semester that they are needed.

Teacher certification is also providing a growing challenge to ensuring our students can access the necessary coursework. While there is an overall lack of people going into education, there is a real shortage in the areas of science, mathematics, world languages and special education. In the next two years, I will be losing a number of veteran educators to retirement, but the one that I am most concerned about is my world language teacher who is certified in French and Spanish. If I cannot find a certified teacher, and especially one who is dually certified, then it is likely that our world language courses will need to be taught online. While that may not be the worst thing in the world for some subject matter, spoken language is learned by having someone who speaks the language listening for the pronunciation and the accent and correcting students as they go along so that they don't repeat a mistake over and over making it a habit which is much more difficult to break later on. We may have students who can read and write in another language, but it is unlikely that they will be fluent speakers.

In other subject areas, we have been leaning on our existing staff and their talents and interests and asking them to take certification tests for some of the areas in which we cannot justify supporting a full time teacher. Our teachers work hard to meet the needs of their students and I value their efforts more than I can express. They do it because they love their students, but some of them are preparing for six or more different classes a day in multiple subject areas. They

don't have the opportunity to teach something multiple times in a day like many of their counterparts in larger suburban and urban schools, so students in rural schools like ours may not get the same depth of knowledge that other students receive. Our students also have fewer elective opportunities since there are fewer teachers to offer classes for them to choose from in their scheduling.

Many times, districts have different contracts with different benefits and different rates of pay. Working to find a way to help districts compensate for differences in those contracts so that more districts could share specialty teachers such as physics, chemistry, music, and other areas, would be a helpful solution for some of these dilemmas for the short term while the state continues to support educator pipeline programs and encourages people to join the ranks of teachers.

State assessment testing is another challenge that we face each year. Our teachers work hard to prepare students for the testing. However, our small class sizes make it very difficult since one or two students doing poorly can skew the results dramatically. We actually score better than most of the charters and cyber charters that our students attend, but because they do not count in the list of the bottom 15 % of schools, we often end up with one of our high schools or elementary schools on the list. It is extremely frustrating in the years that we need to send a letter to all families that we are in the bottom 15% since that erodes their trust in us and then if they choose to send their children to another school, it is often the charter or cyber charter schools that we have outscored, but because their scores are not reported in that way, families don't know that we are actually performing better than the schools that they are choosing.

It would be very helpful if someone would look at the way that is determined and see if there are ways that all public schools, including charter and cyber charter schools can be added to that list. The Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) program's 15% list has been proven to be unstable with schools coming and going each year. Is this list accomplishing its purpose? In rural areas, where there are only limited schools that are often miles and miles from the student's home, can students really take advantage of this program in the way it was intended?

Charters and Cyber Charters

I know that this is a topic that you have heard a lot about over the years. While I do understand that traditional public education is not for every child, I think it is important to look at the way that these schools are funded and the impact that they have on local budgets and communities. If 1-2 children at every grade level attend a school outside of the district, then the district really doesn't have any fewer expenses. There still has to be a teacher for each grade level or subject matter. Each year, we spend nearly \$1,000,000 of our district budget to support these schools. There are several things that are frustrating about this. First, each district pays their own per

pupil cost rather than what it actually costs to educate that student which results in surplus funding to charters and particularly cyber charter schools. Second, there is only one rate for special education students, so whether it is a student who requires speech services once per week or a blind student who requires a special teacher and a full time aide, we are paying the same resulting in gross overpayment for services in some cases. Finally, the amount that we are assessed for charter school and cyber charter students is based upon budgeted numbers rather than actual expenses incurred for the year. It would seem to be much fairer if there were a reconciliation at the end of the school year and charters and cyber charters returned excess funding to districts or conversely if districts were under budgeted that they pay the difference to the charter or cyber charter school.

Poverty

Forest County has one of the highest poverty rates in the state. Students living in poverty often have fewer resources at home to complete homework, study, or engage in activities that help equip them for success during the school day. Many impoverished families lack access to high-speed internet and other materials that can aid a student outside of school. Parents of these families often work longer hours or multiple jobs, meaning they may not be available to assist their children with their schoolwork.

The symptoms of poverty also negatively impact our students. Symptoms of poverty include health issues stemming from a non-nutritional diet, homelessness, lack of food, or the inability to receive medical treatment for illnesses. These factors often place more stress on a student, which can negatively impact the student's ability to succeed in a school.

Homelessness and access to mental health resources are both addressed in separate sections of this testimony. However, with regard to access to nutritious food, it seems important to say that there is one small grocery with 4-5 aisles in all of Forest County. Each of the two primary communities also has a Dollar General which is often the main opportunity for grocery shopping. All students receive free breakfast and free lunch through the Community Eligibility school nutrition program. Without those meals, many of our students would be hungry.

Medical resources are also few and far between in Forest County. There are no dentists or optometrists at all. We do have a small medical center in each of the two primary communities. Both are staffed part-time by a nurse practitioner and a doctor comes either weekly or bi-weekly. It is difficult for families to access medical care and so many times, our school nurses are the first stop for children who are suffering from illness. They work hard to help families get local appointments and find transportation for those who need to get out of the area for medical appointments.

Looking past poverty, many of our students qualify for economically disadvantaged status and fall into what is described as ALICE households. ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE households earn above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but make less than what's needed to afford basic essentials. ALICE households often earn too much to qualify for government assistance, and there is no room in their budgets for emergency expenses. ALICE represents the 38% of Forest County residents who work but struggle to survive. When you combine Forest County households earning below the ALICE Threshold with those living below the FPL, that's 47% of Forest County households facing financial hardship every day while the average in PA is 38%.

It will be important to maintain some special consideration of schools in poverty as the legislature is looking at recommendations for amendments to the funding formula for education monies that are distributed to public schools. In addition, I think that it is important to look at strategies for ensuring that there is support for developing competitive employment strategies and other programs for helping people find their way out of poverty in high poverty regions.

Homelessness

Schools use the definition of homelessness provided by McKinney-Vento which is much broader than that used by housing authorities. A good way to think of the school definition is that if students are living anywhere that they could be asked to leave at any time, then they are considered homeless. Many of our students are doubled up with other families, living with grandparents or other relatives rather than their own parents, a few are living on their own and we have had families living in cars, campers, and motel rooms.

We have seen our homeless population rise continuously. Back in 2012 when I began working in the Forest Area School District, about 5% of our students were considered homeless. Just over ten years later, 11% of our students are counted as homeless. We have 15 or so students who shower regularly at school since they lack the facilities or the personal care products to bathe. I honestly can't tell you how many students bring their laundry to school, but we have purchased washers and dryers for student use at school.

There is very little funding available to support these students and their unique needs that many would not consider to be typical educational necessities. We were pleased to receive some money designated for homeless students through the ARP ESSER funding, but that will expire in 2023-2024. We have developed a good network of community support and established Goodwill collection boxes in both schools so that we can sort out suitable clothing and shoes for students who need them. However, there is always a need for funding since many of the needs fall outside of the requirements for typical grants and funding streams that we are able to access.

One of the other points that I would like to call to your attention is the number of students who are being raised by grandparents. In Forest Area, 6% of our students are living with grandparents and another 4% are living in a household with at least one parent and their grandparents. When the grandparent is in a position where they must assume responsibility for the student, they have a lot of challenges since they do not qualify for a lot of the help that is available since they are not the parent of the child. While this is another topic for another time, I think it is important that we look at ways that grandparents can receive help when they have adopted their grandchildren or are simply hosting them in their home when their parents are unable to care for them.

Housing

While housing may be considered more of a community issue than a school issue, it is concerning for us that many of our students live in substandard housing situations. I am aware of a home where when there was no money to fix the furnace, the family was using a toaster oven with an aluminum foil hood over it to reflect the heat back down toward the floor. I have been in homes with dirt floors and seen chickens and other livestock living in the house with the family since there is no other structure for them to live in on the property.

One of the biggest hurdles for our families is that they are proud of owning their own homes and properties. Many of the resources that are available to help address substandard conditions in housing are not available for those who own their own homes. Currently, I am aware of students living in houses that lack indoor restroom facilities, have windows covered only with tarps, and have no basement or foundation because they were not intended to be year-round dwellings.

There is limited housing stock available in our rural communities. During the pandemic and following, people from more urban areas have been eager to purchase country retreats which has driven our housing prices up dramatically and made any available housing less affordable for our local people.

Based upon conversations with other regional officials, I know that this problem is not limited to Forest County. It is time to consider what we can do to support Pennsylvanians so that everyone can have safe housing.

Transportation

One of the major cost drivers in our annual budget is transportation. Our buses and vans travel 2,607 miles per day and 473,849 miles in a school year. The transportation reimbursement formula yields about 50% of that cost back to us. The formula worked against us because we are not permitted to be reimbursed for unloaded miles and in some cases, our buses need to travel

23-25 miles from the bus garage to pick up the first students of the day. Another factor that works against us is that part of the calculation for the formula is based on the market value aid ratio. In Forest County for various reasons, our market value aid ratio is .31 which is similar to much wealthier districts in more urban areas and adversely affects the reimbursement that we receive. Often as a part of budgetary discussions, we hear that the transportation subsidy is going to be reduced. I would ask that you bear in mind that reducing the transportation subsidy, particularly as the costs of gas, vehicle maintenance and wages for drivers increase, the costs borne by the local taxpayer will only increase.

State Funding

In the Forest Area School District, our revenue breakdown is 8% federal funding, 42% state funding and 50% local funding. That seems reasonable until we start considering some other factors. Just about 50% of our land area is actually taxable. The rest is state and federal land for which we receive some payment, but it is only a fraction of what would be received if the land was not public land, so we really can only raise about \$87,000 per mil of local taxes. In comparing ourselves with the districts surrounding us who do not have nearly the levels of poverty and special education that we do to contend with, we find that they receive a far greater proportion of their funding from the state. This year, our funding has increased as a result of the funding formula that was enacted in 2015, but some years it has decreased since it depends upon where we fall in the poverty calculations in the formula. It is my understanding that there is to be some discussion of the funding formula coming up and I would be happy to volunteer to be a part of any of those discussions to explain what has happened to one of the poorest counties in the state historically and to suggest solutions.

State Mandates

Unfunded state mandates also create budgetary constraints for small systems. While I do understand that it is not reasonable to ask people to vote against school safety provisions for example, not every school needs to meet every mandate in the same way. It would be helpful to have a process by which schools could explain what they are doing and why. Most recently, we had to fight to receive our PCCD funding for school safety because there is a chart that lists everything that we are expected to satisfy. One of those items is having a school resource officer in each school. With school populations of 250 in one building and 150 in the other building and no violent incidents reported in a number of years, this does not seem practical to us since we have the State Police within five minutes response to one building and the Sheriff's Office within five minutes of the other building.

The Future Ready Index, another state mandate, which is designed to measure and report school success, has also been very challenging for us because of our small numbers. In the most

recently published FRI report, our district's School Performance data provided enough information for only 3 of 8 reported items. The rest of the items were not scored due to insufficient data. The Future Ready Index is not providing an accurate reflection of what is happening in our schools. It would be helpful if some other items, such as student opportunities and student services, that do not require a specific number of students to be included were added to the Future Ready Index.

Another topic that often arises for schools is when legislation is passed that requires training for all staff for a specific number of hours. At times, the training does not apply to all staff. One recent example of this is the structured literacy training which is required for anyone holding one of the specified certifications regardless of their current assignment. In our case, I have a high school math and physics teacher who also holds an elementary certification, yet he will need to spend ten hours of PD time working on structured literacy training, which while valuable, certainly will not be as helpful to his current assignment as training in robotics or other STEM initiatives the district is undertaking. At other times, when for example, five hours of training for one topic is required and three hours for another topic, that is 8 of 18 hours that I have available for training for the entire school year. If the topic can be covered in less time in an adequate fashion, does it not make sense to allow for some consolidation, especially when topics overlap such as trauma, school safety, suicide prevention and awareness, child trafficking and mandated reporter training?

It is also of note that no mandates are ever reclassified as best practices or recommendations. When I was in high school back in 1981, the AIDS pandemic was new and scary. It made sense for AIDS education to be specifically mandated. In this day and age, it would seem that AIDS could be incorporated into communicable diseases or sexually transmitted diseases as a part of any standard health curriculum rather than being specifically called out as a mandated topic. It would be helpful if someone would consider streamlining the list of hundreds of mandates that apply to schools.

Conclusion

Please understand that while I have highlighted a number of negative items in this testimony, there are many wonderful things about working in rural schools. Our students are respectful and kind to one another in most situations. We build relationships with families that last for generations. We have a community that is eager to support us and work with us to ensure that students have access to opportunities. We solve problems together and have created work-arounds and solutions to situations that have helped many of our students to be successful.

We are grateful for all of you who have worked on some matters of relief already which have helped to level the playing field for rural students. The dual enrollment grants, the emphasis and

financial support for career and technical education, the focus on career readiness and ensuring that there are connections between school and work have really helped our students to understand that they have demonstrated that they can be successful in further education as well as the world of work.

However, there is much more to be done. People who have lived rurally for generations are leaving the area in search of more services and opportunities. School districts are experiencing a decline in student enrollment never before seen. The curriculum of many of our rural schools has been narrowed to the point where schools may struggle to offer the state mandated coursework needed for graduation. Despite the fact that our rural high schools have a high rate of graduation, they are often denigrated for not offering the same opportunities and variety of choices that others can even though those schools may have far lower graduation rates.

While I have spoken to you mostly about Forest Area School District because that is my primary base of knowledge, I would like you to understand that I could be speaking of many of my neighboring districts. As our schools lose opportunities for electives, AP or IB classes, the arts and many others, our rural students lose the ability to think critically and express themselves appropriately to a variety of audiences.

Poverty has increased. Mental health needs of its children and families have gone unaddressed. Our children are entering school already behind. I am not aware of a comprehensive plan to develop our rural economy, so that it will thrive and our communities will become attractive prospects for young families and new and relocating businesses.

Our residents have been forced from their homes and the communities in which they were raised in order to survive. There is no question that the entire state faces dire economic circumstances, but I believe that the data indicates that our rural communities are most at risk of disappearing. Without intervention, the infrastructure of our rural areas cannot be supported in the future. Supporting our rural communities which have long been a hub of innovation and entrepreneurial efforts must be a priority and that starts with having schools that have the capacity and resources to meet students where they are and help them realize their potential.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide written testimony. If there is any clarification or documentation of this information that you would like me to provide, please let me know. Otherwise, feel free to send question or contact me at ahetrick@forestareaschools.org

Testimony for Bald Eagle Are School District

James Orichosky, Director of Elementary
John Tobias, Director of Secondary
Tacy Boone, Director of Curriculum and Instruction

Historic mandated costs are outpacing state funding growth and when rural schools which traditionally do not have a high tax base it can be a hard financial crisis. Some figures state wide is state funding growth is at 2.8 billion but mandate costs growth are at 6.5 billion.

Charter and Cyber school reimbursed model needs to addressed across the Commonwealth as millions of dollars are pushed out to these schools without proper oversight.

Increase special education appropriation beyond 104 million that was proposed.

Educator workforce shortages are causing rural schools to look at ways to make sure we provide all the necessary education students need to be successful but for example at our high school we have a Math position open that has been open for a number of months and no applications that could do the job needed for our students.

Universal pre-school is a missing part of rural education. In the BEA district we have a partnership with Cen Clear child services to provide some pre-school classrooms but they are income based. So if you do not meet the guidelines you have no other options in the BEA district. No church programs, no YMCA programs etc. You must go outside the district for these services.

Continued commitment to technical education through our Technical schools and opportunities for students to work with our local universities on blended courses that give them a jump on college credits.

Universal free school meals was a great program during the Covid 19 pandemic and making this a priority would be a huge help to our families.

I am Dr. Karen Eppley and I am a graduate of Bald Eagle Area School District. All three of my degrees are from Penn State. I've been researching and publishing rural education research for 15 years. I am a professor of teacher education at Penn State and am deeply committed to this school and life in this district. I still live here and all three of my kids attended Bald Eagle. My oldest completed a chemical engineering and computer science degree from Pitt and my middle is currently completing a engineering and business degree at Penn State Erie. My youngest is entering 10th grade here at the high school. I share this to testify to the fact that this school, like other rural schools across the state, has incredible potential and success in preparing children not only for higher education, but for living wage jobs.

But rural schools like this one do not operate on an equal playing field with larger and better funded districts.

I'll take just a minute to share a few figures from the newest *Why Rural Matters* report. *Why Rural Matters* is a nonpartisan report of rural successes and challenges across the 50 states. The newest report will be published this fall by the National Rural Education Association.

First, over a quarter of a million Pennsylvania students are enrolled in rural school districts across the state. Only six states have more rural students than Pennsylvania. Even though we have a lot of rural students, Pennsylvania's rural enrollment is dwarfed by very large numbers of urban and suburban students. That means that just over 25% of Pennsylvania schools are rural and only 17% of the all state's students are rural. One in five of those rural students have an IEP. No state, proportionally, has more rural students who qualify for special education services.

Rural schools and districts across the state face steep transportation costs because rural districts are large. Only ten states spend more proportionally on transportation relative to what

they spend on instruction. Educational outcomes for rural students in the state overall are better than the U.S. average, but Pennsylvania students who live in homes below the poverty line are outperformed by their peers who don't, especially in 8th grade math. For reference, about 30% of students in this district qualify for free and reduced lunch.

My wish for policy-makers is for policy that more equitably supports the challenges faced by small rural schools, particularly school funding formulas that over-rely on the local tax base, and relief from increasing cyber charter tuition payments- starting with passing house bill 1422 in the state senate- particularly given the dramatic rise of cyber charter school enrollment across the state since COVID.

Bald Eagle Area spent more than 1.5 million dollars on cyber charter tuition in the 2021/2022 school year. The district sends \$15,000 per child to cyber charters, but educational costs do not decrease proportionally. If five 10th graders enroll in cyber charters, the cost to educate the ones who remain does not decrease. There is simply no way to recoup that \$75,000.

Data suggest that cyber enrollments and costs to rural districts have dramatically increased over time and cyber charter achievement data lag behind both brick-and-mortar charters and traditional public schools. Rural district leaders across the state are experiencing increasing financial pressure due to cyber charter enrollment that in many cases has reached crisis proportions. Not only do cyber charter tuition payments affect the ability of the school district to provide needed instructional services and facility maintenance, but they threaten the viability of the school district. If HB 1422 passes, Bald Eagle would save an estimated \$400,000 per year. What could Bald Eagle Area do with an extra \$400,000 per year?

Growing up in the right zip code in Pennsylvania can change a student's entire educational experience. Due to a deep reliance on local property value, Pennsylvania has one of the widest gaps between wealthy and low-wealth school districts of any state in the country, and our students and educators experience extreme inequity in per pupil spending. The disparity is so wide that the most well-off districts spend over \$100,000 more per classroom than the poorest districts. We need state legislators to make a commitment to increase funding for public schools.