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PA House of Representatives  
Republican Policy Committee

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414, Main Capitol Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120  
(717) 260-6144

**Rep. Joshua D. Kail**  
Chairman

**PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing**

**“Back to School”**

**August 7, 2024, at 10 a.m.**

**Mechanicsburg Area School District**  
**Administrative Building, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor**  
**600 S Norway St.**  
**Mechanicsburg, PA 17055**

10:00 a.m.	Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance
10:10 a.m.	<b>Dr. Mark K. Leidy</b> <i>Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units</i>
10:15 a.m.	<b>Dr. Andrew Bitz</b> <i>Superintendent, Mechanicsburg Area School District</i>
10:20 a.m.	<b>Danielle Eisner</b> <i>Science Teacher, Cedar Cliff High School</i>
10:25 a.m.	<b>Mike Gossert</b> <i>Member, Cumberland Valley School Board and President, Pennsylvania School Board Association</i>
10:30 a.m.	Questions for the Testifiers
11:00 a.m.	Closing Comments



## Testifier Biographies

### PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing *"Back to School"*



**Dr. Mark K. Leidy**  
**Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association of  
Intermediate Units**

Mark K. Leidy, Ed.D. is the Superintendent of the Mechanicsburg Area School District. He completed his Doctoral degree in the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program of Education Leaders through Duquesne University. Mark received a Bachelor's and a Master's Degree in Education from Shippensburg University of PA.

Mark has been the Superintendent of MASD since 2010. Prior to this he served the District as Assistant Superintendent (2005-2010) and MASH Principal (2003-2005). Mark started his career as a science teacher in Chambersburg Area School District where

he also served as an administrator then moved to Fannett-Metal School District as a principal prior to coming to MASD.

He is most proud of the learning community that is Mechanicsburg Area School District. Mark is married to Tiffany (Wolcott) Leidy and they are proud parents of two sons, Anthony and Kevin. He enjoys spending time with his family and watching the Pittsburgh Steelers.

**Dr. Andrew Bitz**  
**Superintendent, Mechanicsburg Area School District**

Dr. Andrew Bitz is the Superintendent of the Mechanicsburg Area School District, having served the community in various roles since 2003.

Following his career as a Mechanicsburg high school math teacher and track coach, Andy moved into administration as a high school assistant principal before shifting to the elementary level. He served as the principal of Broad Street Elementary (a grades 1-5 school) and then led the effort to open Elmwood Academy (a grades 4 and 5 school) as the first principal. In 2020, he took on the role of Assistant to the Superintendent, providing academic leadership to the district. He began as Superintendent in 2024.



## **Dr. Andrew Bitz**

### **Superintendent, Mechanicsburg Area School District (cont.)**

Dr. Bitz completed his undergraduate studies and principal's certification at Shippensburg University. At Temple University, Andy earned a Master of Education in 2003 and in 2024 completed his doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. His dissertation examined what school leaders can do to develop cohesive faculties.

Andy and his wife, Jen, are the proud parents of three current Mechanicsburg Wildcat students. Through his years in the Mechanicsburg community, Dr. Bitz has established himself as a leader with a passion for all students to find success in our schools and beyond.



## **Danielle Eisner**

### **Science Teacher, Cedar Cliff High School**

Danielle Eisner is a science teacher at Cedar Cliff High School in the West Shore School District.

A graduate of Central Dauphin East High School, she holds a master's of biology from Lebanon Valley College.

## **Mike Gossert**

### **Member, Cumberland Valley School Board and President, Pennsylvania School Board Association**

Mike Gossert is a board member for the Cumberland Valley School District and serves as the President of the Pennsylvania School Board Association.

Gossert is the president of Keystone Business Connections, LLC (KBC), where he works with government and private clients of all sizes in many different aspects of management consulting. Formerly he was vice president of Quandel Construction and vice president and senior relationship manager for M&T Bank Middle Market and Institutional Market Division for the Harrisburg and Central Pennsylvania region. He also served as the township manager for Hampden Township in Cumberland County for 10 years.

Gossert proudly served in the United States Marine Corps and upon being honorably discharged, earned a bachelor's degree in public policy from Penn State University and a master's degree in public administration from Shippensburg University.





Good morning esteemed members of the Pennsylvania House Republican Policy Committee,

My name is Dr. Mark Leidy, and I am honored to be with you today as the newly appointed Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU). Before stepping into this role, I served as the Superintendent of the Mechanicsburg Area School District for 14 years. I was born and raised in Bedford County, Pennsylvania, and my educational journey began in the small town of Breezewood along the PA turnpike, where I attended local public schools. I pursued higher education at Shippensburg University and was the first in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, followed by a master's degree in Educational Leadership also from Shippensburg University. I later received my Doctorate from Duquesne University.

I would like to begin by expressing gratitude to the committee and the entire state legislature for the recently adopted 2024-2025 state budget. This budget represents a significant step forward in addressing the needs of our schools and intermediate units, ensuring that Pennsylvania's children receive the quality education they deserve. We recognize the challenges of balancing fiscal responsibility with the educational needs of our students and appreciate your efforts in this regard.

Schools are the backbone of our communities, providing not only education but also a sense of belonging and a foundation for future success. They are a critical investment in our state's future, contributing to the development of informed, responsible, and capable citizens. As taxpayers, we all share a vested interest in the efficient and effective use of our resources, and Intermediate Units (IUs) play a crucial role in this process.

Intermediate Units serve as vital connectors between the state and individual school districts, streamlining services and providing cost-effective solutions. For example, through numerous cyber options offered through the Intermediate Units, families can receive the alternative they seek to traditional schools in as good, if not better, quality than commercial cyber schools. The entrepreneurial spirit of IUs is to offer this same service in a much more cost effective way for the taxpayers who are responsible to pay for this option.

In the area of special education, IUs provide essential services to students with special needs, ensuring that every child receives the support and resources they require to succeed. A poignant example comes from a student (we will call him Jim because I want to share some details), who participated in a mixture of district, Intermediate Unit and private special education placements. He found little success in traditional school, but made wonderful progress at a special education placement where he attended from 9th through 12th grade. Upon graduation, which he did on time, he enlisted and served in the military. After an overseas tour, he returned to Pennsylvania and is enrolled in the social work program at Shippensburg University. He has come back to thank staff for never giving up and giving him an opportunity to succeed.

Additionally, the importance of early childhood education and intervention cannot be overstated. Programs like PreK Counts and early intervention administered through IUs, lay the foundation for lifelong learning and success. Consider the story of Miguel, who started as a three year old in a PreK Counts class where he exhibited significant behavior, emotional and social issues that would have

caused many concerns in a Kindergarten classroom. He received early intervention services from the Intermediate Unit and is now a first grader enjoying success in a regular classroom, instead of a student who may have been labeled learning disabled, a significantly more expensive option, without the early intervention provided to him.

IUs are not just service providers; they are also innovators and collaborators, working tirelessly to advance the educational system in Pennsylvania. We bring together educators, administrators, and community members to develop and implement new educational strategies and technologies. For instance, Intermediate Units are currently doing some fascinating work around the use of artificial intelligence in our schools. By keeping our educators professionally developed on these innovations in society, they are better equipped to address the inevitable challenges our children will face, while also incorporating the exciting opportunities associated with something like AI.

A cornerstone of any successful educational system is the quality of its teachers. Great teachers inspire, challenge, and cultivate a love for learning in their students. I have seen firsthand the profound impact a dedicated teacher can have on a child's life. I hope each of you can think back to a teacher that was a difference-maker in your life.

As we look to the future, it is imperative that we continue to attract and retain outstanding educators. This requires consideration on how to attract young people to the profession with incentives and support. We must ensure that our teachers have the tools they need to thrive in an ever-evolving educational landscape. Some of the preposterous accusations from social media, that are then repeated by respected members of our society and finally generalized to educators in the last few years are destructive at best. I often wonder, would any of us want a loved one to enter education as a career with some of the false statements being made by some of the more extreme voices in our communities? Honestly, the simplicity of showing respect and gratitude for the work our educators perform could help attract more young professionals to this crucial profession. I am happy to report that the individuals entering the profession are exceptional people who want to help the next generation. We just need more of them.

In conclusion, the work of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units is grounded in the belief that all children deserve a quality education, regardless of their background or circumstances. By leveraging the unique capabilities of IUs, we can efficiently allocate resources, innovate, and ensure that every child in Pennsylvania has the opportunity to succeed. We are committed to being good stewards of taxpayer dollars while advocating for the needs of our students and educators.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to continuing our partnership as we work together to strengthen Pennsylvania's educational system.

Yours in education,

Mark K. Leidy, Ed. D.

Testimony of Andrew B. Bitz, EdD  
Superintendent, Mechanicsburg Area School District

“Back to School: Embracing Change in Mechanicsburg”

Presented to the House Republican Policy Committee  
August 7, 2024

Chairman Kail, Representative Delozier and committee members,

I am honored to have the opportunity to address this committee with testimony related to the successes and challenges of a growing school district here in Central Pennsylvania. My name is Dr. Andrew Bitz, and I am humbled to serve as the superintendent of Mechanicsburg Area School District. On behalf of our entire school community, I must begin with a word of appreciation for the opportunity to host today’s panel discussion in our District Administrative Offices.

As I prepare to begin my twenty-second year here in Mechanicsburg, and my first as superintendent, let me provide you with some additional details from my background. I want to set the context of my testimony as someone with multiple perspectives on our public education system here in Pennsylvania.

As a student, I grew up in Berks County, spending my entire K-12 public school experience in Wilson School District. I went on to the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, earning my Bachelors of Education in Mathematics at Shippensburg University. I eventually earned my Principal’s Certification at Shippensburg as well. I completed both my Masters and Doctoral studies at a state-related university, becoming #TempleMade at Temple University. I completed my dissertation research with Pennsylvania educators to find out what school leaders can do to develop more cohesive faculties.

As a professional, I have spent the entirety of my twenty-two year career here in Mechanicsburg, first as a high school math teacher and track coach, then a high school assistant principal. I shifted to the elementary level, serving as the principal of a grades 1-5 school and then our 4-5 school. In 2020, I became assistant to the superintendent, and now the superintendent of schools.

Finally, and I might suggest most importantly, I am the spouse of a Pennsylvania public school elementary teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing as well as the father of three amazing children learning and growing in the Mechanicsburg Area School District.

Pennsylvania public school student, researcher, educator, spouse, and parent. I am a true product of our system. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to express the debt of

gratitude to the many fine educators and colleagues here in the state who have had an impact on my life.

Of course, my personal story is not the reason I am here today. My goal through this testimony is to share with you a snapshot of the amazing work being done in the Mechanicsburg Area School District to embrace huge enrollment increases, shifting demographics, and changing programmatic needs to meet the vision for tomorrow's learners. Inherent within the successes I share, will exist acknowledgments to the state for supportive measures. At the same time, I will also admit where we remain challenged both here in Mechanicsburg and in the broader context of K-12 public education in Pennsylvania.

### Embracing Enrollment Increases

If I were to choose a single word to encapsulate the priority work of our district over the last decade, it would be the word "growth". I have to believe that as you drove into Cumberland County today, you must have passed signs of construction, be it residential or commercial. Our county has consistently ranked as fastest growing counties in Pennsylvania, only recently falling to second place. In our district, that has meant going from a student enrollment of approximately 3,800 students in the 2013-14 school year to over 4,700 students in the 2023-24 school year. Nearly a thousand more students in a decade. For a number of years, we were graduating classes of 250 students from our high school, while bringing classes of 350 students into Kindergarten. Another comparison would be that there are a number of districts in our IU that have fewer students total than what we have added over the last decade. Our high school alone has grown in numbers equivalent to absorbing an entire additional grade level to the building.

Thankfully, I testify today as an administrator standing on the shoulders of amazing leaders who came before me that were vigilant to the challenge that we now face. Our administration understood the growth projections nearly a decade ago and much like the penguins in John Kotter's famous book *Our Iceberg is Melting*, began sharing the data to build a guiding coalition. In 2015, our school board commissioned a feasibility study along with a committee of diverse stakeholders to review the outcomes. The charge of this group was to make recommendations for ways to address the challenges ahead. By the time the study concluded, we felt the enrollment increased most dramatically in our elementary buildings with small group instruction in hallways, a growing number of modular classrooms, and the impossibility of starting the next year without leasing even more modular spaces. After considering numerous options, the board approved the committee's recommendation of reconfiguring our entire elementary system and embarking on a decade-long construction and renovation plan that would eventually touch every school building in the district.

Of course, building additions and making renovations to every school does not happen without a significant financial investment. Our administrators, teachers, staff, and school board worked tirelessly to share the story of our growth along with a clear plan for building the infrastructure needed to support our future enrollment. We developed a \$180 million financing



plan with numerous borrowings throughout the decade to support multiple active projects in succession. We added experienced construction managers to our staff to provide oversight to the projects and maximize the ability for our educators to remain focused on the education of students. We remained disciplined in designing educational spaces that would spark creativity and innovation while respecting the public's financial contribution to each project. I am proud to say that after eight school projects over ten years, we just completed the last \$10 million bond issue of the financing plan and it will provide us exactly what we need to finish our high school project while leaving a small amount of margin to address some miscellaneous needs across the district.

How did we do it? Managerially, it began with strong leadership, smart design choices, and solid oversight. Financially, our plan included the School Board, as representatives of our taxpayers, committing a portion of annual tax increases to support the initial stages of the financing plan. There is no doubt that we also benefited from friendly interest rates for much of the time period. Additionally, on our earlier projects, we were able to receive support through the state's PlanCon process. I would encourage the state to examine ways to reopen or reconfigure PlanCon as an opportunity to support the future construction needs of districts around the state.

An increased enrollment also requires more staffing and student service support. We have undertaken a staffing plan that allows us to continue to add first and foremost to the most important resource we have - our teachers. With 75% of our annual budget relying on local revenue from property taxes this would not be able to happen without the partnership between our schools and local community. A vast majority of our growth has come in the form of residential properties meaning that for every additional tax dollar, we often gain additional expenses by way of new students living in the new homes. Committing to additional personnel expenses comes during the same ten year time period when our tuition to charter schools has grown from less than \$1.5 million to nearly \$3.5 million. I appreciate the positive step forward in bringing back a reimbursement within the most recent budget. Still, there are great inequities that still exist within the funding for cyber charters including them charging 500 different rates for the same service. I urge the legislature to continue to examine the unjust system that exists around the funding of cyber charter schools and make additional reforms.

We recognize that the approach we took to address our enrollment increases would not work in every community. Choosing to reconfigure, add onto, and renovate each of our elementary schools demanded a tremendous commitment to our vision by the entire community. Simply building a new elementary school to absorb the growth could have sufficed as an option. However, such a choice would have created an inequity of experience for our students that is unacceptable to us. Some would have benefited from a modern, brand new school while others would have remained in much older buildings. Particularly as our community demographics change, equity remains a key goal within our programs and policies.

### Embracing Demographic Changes



While our student enrollment increased throughout the last decade, it diversified as well, bringing an amazing richness to our community and concurrently presenting new challenges. During the period of 2013-14 to 2023-24, the number of English Learners enrolled in the district went from 114 to 271 students. The number of students identified with special education went from 469 to 853 students. The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch increased annually to now topping 40% for the first time. These statistics just begin to scratch the surface of how our community has changed.

As advocates for public education, we meet changes in our student needs with resolve, not fear. The motto of our district is “Tradition, Pride, Excellence”. Some take “tradition” to mean a reliance on established practices. In the face of a changing community, we must have the courage to critically examine the needs of our current students in an effort to adapt our systems for the future. That willingness to do what is best for our students serves as our tradition. At Mechanicsburg, this has meant not only making equity a hallmark of our building projects, but also as a lens with which to update our policies and practices.

During our last comprehensive planning cycle, over 500 staff and community members spoke to our goals. They highlighted the importance of not only embracing our diversity, but ensuring access to learning environments intentionally designed to foster a sense of belonging for all students. With this as a goal, we have undertaken such efforts as revising our elementary grading system, adopting a more inclusive dress code, partnering with the Muslim community to address needs in our cafeterias, expanding our gifted screening process, and revising the funding structure of extracurricular activities to increase access.

Two of our other comprehensive plan goals similarly seek to address the changing needs within our community. One focuses on providing instructional experiences to develop students at all levels of achievement through a multi-tiered system of support in both academics and behavior. As we know, there exists a close tie between a student’s instructional readiness and their conditions for learning. Therefore, another goal looks to develop opportunities for students and staff to engage in their personal wellness, with particular attention to mental health and social emotional learning.

Again, each of these goals focus on our students. Every single student deserves the dignity of walking into our schools each day with the opportunity to access our amazing programs and feel like they belong. We may disagree on the ways to make that happen, but there can be no disagreement on that core belief. These efforts can at times be misconstrued or misunderstood. I urge the legislature to continue to champion the development of learning environments intentionally designed to foster a sense of belonging for all students.

### Embracing a Vision for the Future

While our enrollment and demographic changes may be slightly more unique, the changing programmatic needs of today’s students impacts every district. As I mentioned, our “tradition” is to adapt with intentionality and purpose in ways that meet the needs of our students

with excellence. It is with this in mind that the final of our most recent comprehensive plan goals focuses on ensuring the delivery of an academic program that prepares students for the future. Meeting this goal has come through modernizing our facilities and updating our programs.

Through the building projects of the last decade, each of our schools now incorporate educational spaces prepared to meet the demands of today's and tomorrow's learners. Academically, our schools all now include open, flexible spaces to accommodate individual support, small group collaboration, or large group instruction. Our libraries have become featured spaces that not only provide students access to an amazing collection of books, but also an assortment of digital resources. Areas capable of supporting age-appropriate Science Technology Engineering Art Mathematics (STEAM) activities exist in each of our schools, with the largest centered in our high school. This wing of the building houses spaces to support classes across the STEAM departments with easy access for projects to move through the design cycle in a wide range of mediums. We recently took advantage of an opportunity to purchase a state-of-the-art hydroponics lab and incorporate it into the high school project. This lab will allow students across curricular areas to learn more about sustainability, growing crops within a food desert, and farming in a controlled environment. Our infrastructural changes also added onto and renovated dozens of recreational spaces to ensure and increase access for our students and the community. This included modernizing our main gymnasium at the high school, rebuilding our high school pool and natatorium, building a free-standing activities center to support large group activities in both athletics and music, enlarging our elementary multi-purpose rooms to ensure each could support a full-size gymnasium and refurbishing the playgrounds at our elementary schools.

These facility projects helped to set the stage for amazing programming. With modernized school buildings in place, now our academic teams can use their incredible expertise to further develop our programs and curricula in environments that meet our enrollment and programmatic needs. For example, our Kindergarten Academy provides a unique school experience to welcome our community's youngest students into formal schooling. Our elementary program continues to embark on improving our elementary language arts program to incorporate both classical practices and the most recent research about how our youngest students learn to read. Our intermediate school, where all fourth and fifth graders attend, houses an enrollment the size of many middle schools in a building with many of the benefits of a large school, while giving students a uniquely personal elementary experience. Our middle school offers programs that engage students in a wide range of exploratory experiences at a critical age for young teens. Finally, our high school continues to expand programs both on and off campus to allow students now within a block schedule to dive deeply into areas of interest as they develop skills to launch them into the world post-graduation.

Of course, once again, all of these programmatic advancements require resources including time, talent, and treasure. Whether writing a new curriculum, buying a grade level resource to support learning, or attending professional development, academic improvement comes at a cost. As a district, we are fortunate to enjoy a very supportive community and a school board that recognizes the cost associated with continuing to provide excellence within

our schools. Additionally, support from the state budget has allowed us to avoid increasing our local taxes all of the way to the Act 1 index. Speaking as the superintendent of Mechanicsburg, we are very appreciative of the increased funding in this year's budget and some of the steps taken to establish lasting support such as resetting the Basic Education Funding distribution base to 2022-2023 levels. Concurrently, I must also speak as an advocate for public education across the state. It remains critical for the legislature to continue taking steps to address funding inequities across our 500 Commonwealth school districts. Solutions for fair funding exist and committing to their use as a governing body is the only way to set the conditions for excellence to prevail from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh and south-central PA to the northern tier. Fair, adequate, and equitable funding will give districts the tools to aid our incredible teachers and staff in their work and our students an equitable shot at becoming the people they are capable of becoming.

### Conclusion

While the journey ahead will continue to present difficult times for both ourselves as a local district and you as legislators, I remain incredibly optimistic. Mechanicsburg Area School District faces, and tackles, challenges yet still provides an outstanding educational experience for our community's youth. We appreciate the support that our local representatives, Representatives Delozier and Kutz, give to us and thank them for serving us well at the capitol. Thank you all for your dedication to service and your desire to learn more about how you can support public education in Pennsylvania. As I described our district, I look forward to seeing you meet changes with a resolve to do what is best for the students of our Commonwealth.

Good morning.

I'm Danielle Eisner, a Biology and Anatomy and Physiology Teacher at Cedar Cliff High School in the West Shore School District. With 28 years of experience teaching in this district, I'm honored to share insights on our innovation programs and the evolving needs of our students.

One of my passions is our STEM Program, a free initiative offered through Junior Achievement of York County. This program provides our 10th-grade students with a day of hands-on STEM activities, exposing them to various careers in the field. We've also established partnerships with healthcare providers, the Whitaker Center, York College, York Hospital, and my alma mater Lebanon Valley College (LVC) to offer students additional opportunities to explore health careers. However, we need to expand these programs in Cumberland County, as experiential learning is vital for applying classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios.

In recent years, we've seen significant success with dual enrollment and AP classes. As a parent of children attending Red Land High School, I've witnessed firsthand how these programs allow students to earn college credits while meeting high school requirements. By certifying our staff to teach these courses, we've removed barriers for students who may not have had access to these opportunities previously.

The diversity of our student population has grown substantially over my 28 years of teaching. We now have students speaking approximately 35 different languages, and our EL program has flourished. I recently attended a panel discussion where our courageous EL students' shared insights about their cultures, traditions, and experiences adjusting to life in the USA. It was heartwarming to see these students feel valued as part of the Colt Family. When making decisions about Keystone Testing, I urge you to consider the unique challenges our EL students face.

Two standout innovative programs in our district are the Da Vinci program at Red Land and the Aquaponics Course at Cedar Cliff. These programs are available to students across both high schools, providing

opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary studies and cutting-edge agriculture practices. The Da Vinci program integrates math, science, and tech ed, challenging students to create innovative solutions. The Aquaponics lab teaches students about sustainable farming while running a business and educating younger students about these practices.

We've implemented various initiatives to support our struggling students, including after-school tutoring programs like Math and Snacks. We offer credit recovery through the York Adams Academy and provide transportation for students to obtain their learner's permits. Co-teaching models support inclusion for special education students. The role of teachers has expanded to include responsibilities like nursing, counseling, parenting, policing, and financial guidance.

As I conclude, I want to shift the focus from our innovative practices to a question that was proposed to me, what policy can we as lawmakers help out with moving forward? I really don't know how to answer this because there are so many items you could help with in public education. Mental health funding is crucial, yet it has decreased despite increased demands. Poverty rates persist, and we need targeted funding to support affected students. While public school enrollment has declined, our Spanish and multicultural population has grown, and charter schools is not the solution. Special Education requests have increased by 16% over the last decade, even as overall enrollment drops. The number of Instructional I teaching certificates issued has declined by over 64% in the past decade, highlighting the need for incentives like increased salaries and benefits to attract more teachers to the profession. Our system of grading the teachers is flawed, especially with the way Keystone testing is done with multiple pathways being allowed. Can we get rid of cell phones in the classroom? We need to make parents and students accountable for their actions. Our system now limits suspensions based on their gender, ethnicity, Special Education diagnosis, but we discipline based on behavior so the above should not be factors. We need your support to champion public education.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my perspective.

## **Successes**

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic forever changed public education. Schools like ours in Cumberland Valley had to become more flexible and responsive to student needs. We've demanded more out of our administrators, teachers, and support staff. And locally elected school leaders have been forced to deal with political and social issues.

But through it all we've kept our mission squarely in focus. To provide each and every student with a world-class education. And I'm proud to say that we've done that here in CV.

In 2023-24, 887 CV students earned over 2700 college credits through dual enrollment programs with our local partners.

In 2023-24, Cumberland Valley had 136 students enrolled in vocational education, the highest number in more than a decade, reflecting a growing trend in the number of students choosing this important pathway.

In 2023-24, Cumberland Valley began an emerging healthcare program in partnership with UPMC with more than 60 students enrolled in healthcare pathways which will result in clinical rotations within UPMC facilities. This creates an important pathway for students into one of the fastest growing fields in our region.

In 2023-24, Cumberland Valley broke records for participation and success with Advanced Placement courses. 742 students took 1,414 exams. But more importantly, we also saw a record number of students scoring 3+ with 88.3% of our test takers hitting this mark.

In the Fall of 2023, Hampden Elementary was named a national Blue Ribbon School, one of just 353 schools nationwide to earn this distinction. This recognition is based on high achievement on state assessments and the programs implemented to achieve those scores. While Hampden was highlighted, these same programs were implemented across all of our elementary buildings, and our elementary students across the district continue to show both growth and achievement.

In 2023-24, Cumberland Valley's primary students showed the highest levels of growth in reading, as evidenced by test data, in five years. This success represents the district's commitment to improving literacy instruction to realize our vision of all students becoming skilled readers. It is a direct reflection of the adoption of a strong core program, educators that are trained in the fundamentals of structured literacy, and better-aligned, research-based interventions for students who are struggling.

In the 23-24 school year, Cumberland Valley's K-12 launch of the Portrait of an Eagle ensured that students are prepared not only with academic content knowledge but also with essential skills needed to succeed in today's rapidly evolving world. This initiative focuses on developing the whole child, leveraging a community vision prioritizing competencies and dispositions for post-secondary success. By aligning school operations and pedagogy around this collective vision, we are bridging the gap between high school graduation and future challenges, reinforcing our commitment to ensure every student graduates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to enroll, enlist or employ.

In 2023-24, Cumberland Valley became a Purple Star District, as recognized by the United States Military for our support of military connected students and families.

In order to proactively address staffing shortages, Cumberland Valley has partnered with Messiah University and the Capital Area IU to fast-track certification requirements and get qualified individuals into classrooms. These creative and innovative partnerships are allowing us to minimize the challenges related to teacher shortages.

These are just a few examples of successes for the Cumberland Valley School District.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) has recently created a website where school districts can post their success stories and share them with the public. The site – [greatpaschools.com](https://greatpaschools.com) – is intended to help public schools share all the great work that they are doing on a daily basis. Too often media coverage of public schools focuses only on the negative. I know firsthand that school leaders and school districts often don't spend enough time highlighting their success stories. This site will hopefully help.

## **Impediments**

### **State of Education**

Each year, PSBA puts out an annual report on the State of Education in PA. The report is intended to focus on the biggest challenges facing school districts and how they are impacting them. The 2024 report was shared with legislators in February.

According to the 2024 report, the biggest anticipated challenges facing school districts heading into the 2024-25 school year were staffing shortages, budgeting for the next school year, and student mental health issues. Each one of those issues is examined in more detail in the report.

In the area of staffing, the biggest areas of need are substitute teachers, instructional aides, special education teachers and staff, transportation personnel, and regular education teachers. The biggest certification areas needed are special education, math, science, and foreign language. When asked if teacher shortages have impacted their educational program, nearly three-quarters of school districts reported that they have experienced an impact due to shortages in their area. Half of all school districts also reported having open teaching positions at the start of the last school year.



The most identified sources of budget pressure for school districts have remained consistent over the eight years that the report has been issued, highlighting the impact of mandated costs - charter school tuition payments, special education and pensions - and the need for additional state education funding. However, in 2024, facilities costs have replaced pension costs in the top four budget pressures. The most commonly reported response to those budget pressures were raising local property taxes, drawing down fund balance, reducing staffing, and postponing needed building renovations/maintenance.

In the area of student mental health, school leaders reported student mental health issues as being the biggest challenge related to student instruction, finding that those issues were substantially impacting students' ability to learn. School leaders also reported that nearly half of their students have some degree of mental health need. The biggest challenges in connecting students with mental health services were found to be a scarcity of mental health service providers, reluctance to seek help, a lack of funding to help pay for those services, and the distance between the school/family and providers.

I'd encourage you all to check out the report as it provides a ton of information on school districts and what they're facing.

#### School Construction and the Separations Act

In a growing school district like Cumberland Valley, the lack of state funding for construction or renovation presents us with significant challenges. Without state funding, we have to rely entirely on our local taxpayers to fund any new school buildings or renovations. In the last 4 years we've built a new middle school, added an elementary school and are currently underway with renovating and expanding a middle school and an elementary school. Each project came at the increased cost of our local taxpayers. The past two state budgets have included some state funding for remediating environmental hazards in school buildings, but without sustained funding for the PlanCon program that was reformed in 2019, this will continue to be the case for school districts across the state.

Pennsylvania state law also presents school districts with challenges when it comes to school construction projects. Primary among them is the Separations Act which dates back to 1913 and requires schools to bid and enter into contracts with at least four prime contractors (general, electrical, plumbing, HVAC). Pennsylvania is currently the only state still clinging to this antiquated public works requirement.

Although the intent of the law is to prevent taxpayers from overpaying for unnecessary subcontractor markups, it actually ends up costing taxpayers more in project delays, management costs, and project changes. It's past time for Pennsylvania to repeal or reform the Separations Act to allow school districts to bid projects using a single prime contractor.

Similarly, is the requirement for schools to pay prevailing wage on school construction projects. Prevailing wage inflates cost, using taxpayer money ineffectively. It is estimated that prevailing wage adds 10-30% to the cost of projects which requires public schools to pay more for construction projects than private individuals or companies. Diverting precious resources away from classrooms.

Prevailing wage also does nothing to ensure quality standards in building construction. Some contend that prevailing wages ensure quality construction; however, all school projects must comply with building codes and health and safety standards. Prevailing wage does not add value to school construction projects, just artificial cost inflation.

As school leaders search for more opportunities to stretch every tax dollar they receive, eliminating the requirement to pay inflated prevailing wage would go a long way.

### Mandates

Simply put, mandates tell public schools what they are required to do, how they must do it and ultimately, dictate how much they will spend to get it done.

When considered separately, many mandates can be viewed as efforts to implement important policy objectives or as genuine efforts to enhance the quality of education, student achievement, safety and wellness, accountability, transparency, and the efficient expenditure of taxpayer money. However, when viewed as a collective whole, mandates create unwieldy and burdensome requirements, force money away from classrooms, result in higher property taxes, and negatively impact local decision-making because they either dictate in considerable detail the actions to be taken or severely limit available options.

The point here is not to advocate for the elimination of mandates, but rather to recognize the impact that mandates, particularly unfunded or underfunded mandates have on school districts. Although the state imposes many mandates, the state only occasionally contributes toward the cost of implementation. Those contributions typically do not keep pace with escalating costs and in some cases state funding has completely disappeared, leaving local school districts, and their taxpayers, to assume the burden of an ever-increasing share of the costs required to comply with mandates.

This impact was at the heart of the recent Commonwealth Court ruling on state education funding. The impact that those mandates had on school districts that could not afford to generate the local revenues needed to pay for those mandates and still invest in school facilities, staffing, curriculum, technology, and other educational improvements was profound.

Unfunded and underfunded mandates force school districts to pay the costs associated with compliance out of local funding or to make other difficult choices. Specifically, school district options to pay for unfunded and underfunded mandates include, but are not limited to:

- Raising local taxes (such as property taxes).
- Cutting spending or adjusting operations in other areas, which can include, but are not limited to the following:
  - Increasing class sizes
  - Cutting staff positions
  - Eliminating or reducing programs and course or extracurricular offerings
  - Foregoing curriculum updates
  - Reducing professional development opportunities for staff
  - Postponing building maintenance or technology upgrades
  - Reducing the amount of books/supplies the school provides students and staff
- Reducing reserve funds.

There are a few changes that the state could make to help reduce the impact of mandates and to better understand their impact. First, the state could ensure that any state legislation imposing new mandates on school districts would be accompanied by state funding or a state-provided solution to implement the mandate which would reduce the burden of the mandate. Second, creation of a legislative commission to periodically and systematically review the cumulative effect of mandates on public schools and make recommendations for mandate relief, including sunseting mandates that do not enhance administrative or academic operations. Third, enact legislation requiring the General Assembly to assess, prior to enacting new mandates, the likely cost impact of those new mandates on taxpayers and/or school districts similar to the fiscal notes prepared for legislation requiring the expenditure of state dollars.

There are also several other reforms that aren't traditional education issues where school leaders would like to see some relief. Here are two quick examples. House Bill 2103, introduced by Representatives Ortity and Schlossburg would update our public advertisement requirements to come into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Senate Bill 210 from Senator Brooks would allow school districts to recoup some costs associated with complying with Right-to-Know requests made for a commercial purpose. While these reforms are not the most monumental, they do represent steps to conserve district resources and better serve constituents.

#### Charter School Tuition

Although some reforms were made in the recently passed Act 55 of 2024, there is still substantial work to be done regarding reforming the way school districts pay for charter school tuition.

Charter school tuition payments have been the top sources of budget pressure for school districts in each of the last 5 years according to the annual State of Education report. It's important to note that this does not mean that charter school tuition is the biggest expenditure for school districts, but rather the impact that tuition payments have on district budgets. A good analogy would be gas or utility costs. Gas and utilities aren't the biggest expenditures in most people's budgets, but if they want to drive anywhere or light their homes, they have to pay for gas and electricity. When gas or electricity prices (which they have no control over) rise, it leaves drivers and homeowners with limited options. They can try to increase their income by working a second job; they can not drive as much or reduce their power usage; or they can cut other expenses to free up money to pay those costs. That's exactly what school districts are forced to do because of charter school costs.

This is due to several factors. First, flaws in the way tuition rates are calculated continue to force school districts to overpay charter schools, particularly when it comes to cyber charter schools and students requiring special education. For example, we know that 98% of the special education students in cyber charter schools are in the lowest cost tier reported to PDE. However, school districts are still forced to send an inflated one-size-fits-all tuition payment to the cyber charter school that is based on the school district's expenses where nearly 95% of the students in the highest cost tiers attend. It is imperative that special education students get all of the supports and services called for, but the data is clear – school districts are overpaying for special education.

Second, districts cannot predict from one year to the next how many of its students will enroll in charter schools leaving them to make guesses about the financial impact it will have. Many times

students enrolling in a charter school are enrolling from another private school, so this presents an entirely new financial impact to the district.

Third, districts do not save money when students leave for charter schools. If you take the third grade class at one of our elementary schools where there might be 75 students in the grade and 10 of those students decide to leave and go to a charter school. Those students would be taking with them anywhere from \$123,000 to \$269,000 depending on how many of those students would be identified by their new charter school as needing special education. But yet there's no way for us to save any money from their departure. We're not going to be able to eliminate any staff positions, we're not going to save any money on heating or utilities, and those students could choose to come back at any time.

I'm hopeful that the General Assembly will continue working on this issue in the Fall. I know the House has already passed comprehensive cyber charter school reform bill in House Bill 1422. I'd like to thank the 20 House Republicans that voted for HB 1422 last year and encourage all of you to talk to your local districts about the impact that charter school tuition has and then help advocate to get charter school funding reform to the Governor's desk.