

## ***Back to School Affordability Hearing***

Good morning, my name is Mikal P. Sabatine. I am the Executive Director of Families First of Pen Argyl. We are a 501c3 Non-profit organization that was organized to provide services, programs and resources to families in the Pen Argyl Area School District to provide a better quality of life and have been proudly doing so for almost 25 years!

I would like to take a moment to express my appreciation to Representative Flood for her concern about the Families in our district and her attempt to help alleviate some of the financial burden created by students heading back to school.

Unfortunately, our school district, like many others in the state, has been highlighted recently by reporting statistics on the rate of poverty based on our last census reporting. It should become readily apparent that the once trivial expense of returning to school has become a colossal challenge to some families because of these increases in poverty.

- 14% of Pennsylvania Students live in poverty. That translates to one out of every seven children.
- The Pen Argyl School District saw a 76% increase in poverty growth in 2023.
- A number that continues to escalate is the percentile of students that receive either free or reduced lunch. This is currently 55% for Pen Argyl. That is every other student.
- The Slate Belt Area has the two fastest-growing areas of poverty in the state.

\*\* U.S. Census Bureau 2023 Datawrapper/The Morning Call/TNS

Families First has worked to assist in defraying the cost of back-to-school expenses for many years. We have offered “Back to School Days” prior to the kickoff of school to supply the necessary items requested by the schools.

This past year as we recognized the overwhelming need and number of students that did in fact require supplies, we stepped up our game and hosted our first Back to School Bonanza.

This event’s scope far exceeds the abilities of Families First, but we were so fortunate to incorporate the assistance of several churches, local businesses and individuals who donated a plethora of supplies.

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Based on the requested items from the school, a family of three children, one in elementary and two in middle school would be confronted with an expense of about \$280.00 for the supplies.

A parent with one student in 8<sup>th</sup> grade would spend about \$114 to meet the needs requested.

Families First would have incurred an estimated cost of \$4,786.00 in supplies to meet the needs of the approximately 150 event attendees. During the event, we distributed over 2,500 items and offered free underwear and socks, in addition to hosting a used clothing sale.

Families First does provide an in-school “School Store” to all three of our buildings. We provide the basic essentials for students which include backpacks. These supplies are available to help yourself and at no charge to our students anytime they are in need. We also provide supplies to our teachers and guidance counselors.

There is absolutely no question that the rate of poverty has far exceeded the rate of income growth in our area. This makes not only Back to School a challenge for our students and families, but everyday life becomes more of a struggle.

Any level of consideration to a reprieve from taxable status on the Back-to-School Supplies would provide a measurable benefit to families incurring these costs.

I thank each of you for your time and attention to this ever-increasing concern and I am optimistic that Representative Flood’s commitment to her constituents will help bring some resolution to this important issue.