



Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools

**Comments to the Senate Education Committee
Regarding the Educational Opportunity and Accountability Act (SB 6)**

Good afternoon, Chairman Smucker, Chairman Dinniman and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Dr. Eric Eshbach. I serve as superintendent of the Northern York County School District and chairman of the PASA Legislative Committee. On behalf of district superintendents and other members of PASA, I thank the committee for providing the opportunity to share our views on Senate Bill 6, the Educational Opportunity and Accountability Act.

PASA thanks Senator Smucker and sponsors of Senate Bill 6 (SB 6) for focusing attention on this ongoing challenge. PASA fully supports the primary objective of SB 6, that of transforming the performance of Pennsylvania's lowest performing schools so that every student can have the opportunity to learn and achieve at high levels through quality instruction, essential support services, appropriate resources and instructional materials as provided to students enrolled in our highest performing schools.

Pennsylvania public schools perform, as a whole, as one of the top ten best performing states in the nation. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, high school graduation rates, college enrollment rates and other measures of student achievement demonstrate the performance of Pennsylvania schools consistently exceeds that of all but a handful of states. Pennsylvania is home to many of the best performing schools in the nation that serve as models of innovation and excellence.

We are also home to some of the most challenged, persistently underperforming schools. Despite well intentioned efforts, the Commonwealth's record of supporting and intervening around its underperforming schools over the past fifteen years is one fraught with fits and restarts, failed experiments, under-resourced interventions, inconsistent leadership, lack of capacity and expertise together with ongoing churn of policies that measure school performance and hold underperforming schools accountable.

This is hard work. There are no magic or quick fix solutions. It takes strong, sustained, and committed leadership and smartly targeted investments over time. It takes the political will to support long-term strategies that will provide lasting and sustained gains in student achievement. We must avoid politically expedient, short-term, quick fix solutions that provide immediate improvements that are not typically sustained over time. It also requires sustained professional development, technical assistance, ongoing support and oversight by the Department of Education.

Since May 2000, when the Commonwealth first established a statewide accountability and school improvement system for its lowest performing school districts (Education Empowerment Act), state accountability and school improvement policies, sometimes driven by federal grants, have undergone major changes at least four times. These include state implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, a rescaling of the Adequate Yearly Progress targets and intervention in 2005, implementation of federal School Improvement Grants in 2009, and in 2013 establishment of School Performance Profiles and a new accountability system through a waiver of the No Child Left Behind Act by the U.S. Department of Education.

As recently noted in data released by the U.S. Department of Education, Pennsylvania has the widest disparities between the highest and lowest resourced school districts of all the fifty states. Many of the schools that will likely be designated as intervention schools and those schools that will be transferred to the Achievement School District are located in school districts that struggle with the most significant disparities, relative to student needs, in our state.

Many schools that serve the Commonwealth's most challenged students are commonly found to be without the resources necessary to provide their students with the most basic of instructional and support service needs. As indicated by the January 2015 PASA-PASBO Report on School District Budgets, school districts with the least wealth were forced to eliminate or cut academic programs at far greater rates than other school districts. In addition, high poverty school districts had to resort to furloughing staff and abolishing and leaving unfilled vacant teaching and other critical positions at rates far higher than other school districts. These include school nurses, guidance counselors, librarians and physical education, art and music teachers.

The Commonwealth's record of support, oversight and funding its persistently underperforming schools, across several governors, has been far from stellar.

The first systematic effort, outside of federally directed school improvement efforts for Title I schools, was the Education Empowerment Act enacted in May 2000. The legislation sunset in June 2010. It created two categories of district improvement: the Education Empowerment List and Education Empowerment Districts. Ten school districts met the criteria to be placed on the Education Empowerment List. Two school districts met the criteria to be designated as Education Empowerment School Districts.

Chester-Upland School District, one of two Education Empowerment School Districts, had already been declared a financially distressed school district in 1994 and operated under the authority of a Financial Board of Control. The chair of the Board of Control, who was appointed by the Secretary of Education, turned over the management of academic operations, including curriculum, instructional strategies, assessment, professional development and other matters related to academic performance and operations for nine of its ten district schools to a private education management company in 2001. That company, Edison/Learn Now, then the preeminent privately held school management company, following four hard years of struggles to improve student achievement and school culture, cancelled its management agreement with the Department of Education and pulled out of the school district in 2005.

Just as Edison/Learn Now pulled out from its commitment to turnaround schools in Chester Upland, just last month it was reported by Education Week that three national charter school networks have scaled back plans to take over underperforming schools in Memphis that had been transferred to the Tennessee Achievement School District. A Network spokesman indicated that transforming an existing school, where students are already enrolled, requires an entirely different approach than what they utilize when they open a new school and where families choose to enroll their children in the school. The challenges of turning around an existing school are much more acute.

A study of state takeovers by the Education Commission of the States found that state takeovers tend to improve administrative and financial operations but have less impact on improving student achievement. Student performance of districts under state control is usually mixed. The report concluded, “state takeovers, for the most part, have yet to produce dramatic and consistent increases in student performance, as is necessary in many of the school districts that are taken over.”

School turnaround efforts and state-level capacity in both Massachusetts and Tennessee was considerably enhanced in both states receiving federal Race to the Top funds. In addition to twenty-plus years of strategic and consistently focused reform efforts in Massachusetts, turnaround efforts directly benefited from receipt of \$250 million in federal Race to the Top funding. Tennessee received \$500 million in Race to the Top funding. Turnaround of underperforming schools was one of four areas in which Race to the Top funding was directed. In contrast, Pennsylvania received \$41 million in Race to the Top funding.

The Massachusetts Department of Education, which supports fewer school districts and a little more than half the statewide student enrollment in Pennsylvania, has far greater dedicated resources and capacity to assist underperforming schools. Its Department of Education has nearly 100 more staff than does the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Last week the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance of the U.S. Department of Education released findings of a survey of state capacity to support school turnarounds. Eighty-percent of states reported significant gaps in expertise for supporting school turnaround efforts. While 85 percent of states reported using various strategies to enhance their capacity to support school turnaround efforts, these efforts typically engaged contractors on a short-term basis through use of short-term federal funding.

Massachusetts has developed and grown its own capacity to lead and assist its underperforming schools to improve. It is a very different landscape than what we developed to assist underperforming schools in our state. Massachusetts enacted its education reform act more than twenty years ago, establishing a new school finance system designed to make available an adequate level of resources to each school district regardless of each community’s relative wealth. It also enacted a new accountability system to hold schools and districts responsible for progress in meeting state standards. Unlike policy approaches in our state, Massachusetts provided a seven-year phase-in of its reform and accountability system to provide fair notice, provide professional development and support to schools so they understand and have time to

align district curriculum, instruction, local assessments and other systems to the new requirements.

Massachusetts also established an Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (now referred to as the Center for District and School Accountability) in response to complaints regarding the state's limited capacity to offer guidance and assistance to underperforming schools and districts. The Center works with districts by providing cost-effective technical assistance to promote a culture of continuous improvement and provides districts with the tools and skills to put improvement strategies into practice. The Center also works with districts to align instruction with state standards, use data to inform and differentiate instructional practice, and use educator evaluation tools as a means of professional improvement. These are just a few examples of the work of the office.

Massachusetts' Office of District and School Turnaround coordinates the work of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to partner with the lowest performing districts and schools to turn around student performance. The office works with the 10 largest urban school districts providing customized support to build capacity and intervene in high need schools.

The Massachusetts Department of Education established six regional District and School Assistance Centers to help districts and their schools strategically access and use professional development and targeted assistance to improve instruction and raise achievement for all students.

These are just some of the supports and resources that Massachusetts offers to assist the effort to turnaround its underperforming schools.

School districts, particularly those that have underperforming schools, typically experience rapid turnover in district and school leadership. Average tenure of large urban school district superintendents nationwide is 3.2 years. In Pennsylvania 51 percent of the district superintendents have less than three years tenure in their current school district and only 26 percent have served in their current school district six years or more.

The constant churn of district leadership causes ongoing disruption of district operations, reaching all the way down into the classroom, as the focus of school boards and central office staff is focused on recruiting a new superintendent instead of improving student achievement. New district leaders often make other changes in central office administration, implement new programs and sometimes discontinue programs that were recently implemented in the district. This cycle can result in increased costs, frustration by teachers and parents and potential of lost opportunities for improvement by ending programs before they have a chance to take hold and demonstrate success. Recent research has found that some urban superintendents, as a matter of survival, given their limited tenure, when taking leadership of a new school district may seek to implement quick fixes that may provide a bump in student achievement as indicated on state tests but are not sustainable over time.

In conclusion, PASA supports the effort to establish a comprehensive and fair accountability system that seeks to transform and turn around persistently underperforming schools. To achieve

this end, the state must build its own capacity and expertise that can lead, support, monitor and sustain proven interventions over time such as building and supporting high quality staff, implementing a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards, training and supporting teachers to utilize data and strategies to differentiate instruction, use and analysis of formative assessments, quality learning resources and instructional materials, ongoing professional development, accountability based on appropriate multi-measures of success and consistent and high quality school leadership.

PASA is eager to work with the Committee to build upon the framework provided in Senate Bill 6 to establish a comprehensive system of supports and interventions that will transform Pennsylvania's persistently underperforming schools into public schools for which we can all be proud.