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May 2, 2020

The Honorable Secretary Pedro Rivera
Secretary of Education,
Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Dear Secretary Rivera,

I write in response to your suggestion that schools throughout Pennsylvania will likely not reopen in the fall. What an outrageous assertion. Are you intimating every school building in Pennsylvania cannot be used in educating our children this fall? What is the plan to return our students back to classrooms this fall?

Your attitude is a can't do attitude. Let's be blunt. You do not want the schools to reopen in the fall. You should be exhibiting a can-do attitude. We need to open the schools safely just after Labor Day.

1) Critical questions about the state of education during the current crisis.

Under COVID-19, are our students getting full day curriculums? Are they having interactions with teachers and administrators and staff? Please tell me that teachers are calling some number of their students each day.

Is a teacher or at least a staff person calling through each student with intellectual or physically disability and his or her family on at least a weekly basis?

How much instruction are our students getting each day? In grade school? Middle and high school? At trade and career technical education schools? Are students self-teaching? Are parents teaching? Is there value added from the educational establishment? What measurables have you put in place? **These questions need answered.**

2) Facts about public education funding.

Teachers, administrators and staff are all being paid. All medical benefits are covered. As you know, total state spending on PreK-12 public education is nearly \$13 billion. Additionally, tax dollars raised by school districts on a local level are authorized by existing state law. When state and local funding of public education are combined, Pennsylvania spends over \$33 billion on our PreK-12 public education system. Pennsylvania's per student spending on public schools ranks third out of 50 states. Pennsylvania ranks second in overall average teacher salary.

Since 2010-11, annual state contributions to the Public School Employees' Retirement System have increased by over 800%. In this budget year alone, the state is contributing over \$2.6 billion into the teachers' pensions, meeting the actuarially required contribution. Combined with local tax contributions enabled by the state, taxpayers are contributing over \$4.6 billion annually to the teachers' pensions.

3) *Data shows COVID-19 poses a serious risk to seniors and others with comorbidities.*

We need to look at the data to determine the population that is most impacted by COVID-19.

a) *COVID-19 death statistics.*

As of May 1, Pennsylvania has unfortunately suffered 2,354 deaths attributable to COVID-19, but we need to keep these in context. Our state's population is over 12,820,000. The percentage of our citizens who have passed away from COVID-19 is 0.018%. Of these 2,354 deaths, 1,560 have been in nursing homes or personal care homes, almost 66%.^{1 2}

99 deaths have occurred in Allegheny County, a county of 1,218,000 citizens. That means 0.008% of our county's population has passed attributable to COVID-19. Of the 99 citizens that died, the report says that almost 78% of these citizens were seniors in 'nursing homes and personal care homes.'

b) *Hospital beds utilized by COVID-19 patients.*

As of May 1, 2,664 persons diagnosed with COVID-19 are in hospital beds out of 37,000 available hospital beds in Pennsylvania. Most of these persons - we have been told by hospital officials - are seniors with comorbidities from nursing facilities and personal care homes. Of the available hospital beds in Pennsylvania, 7.2% have COVID patients. Of the 2,664 patients, 558 have use of a ventilator. That means that of all hospital beds available, about 1.5% are occupied by patients in need of some use of ventilators. UPMC, the state's largest health system and largest employer, has 5522 beds in 40 hospitals across the state. There are 113 patients diagnosed with COVID-19 in those 5,522 beds on May 1, meaning about 2% of UPMC's beds have COVID patients.

c) *What to expect in dealing with COVID-19 moving forward.*

In the PennLive article dated April 30, 2020, UPMC Doctor Donald Yealy, who is UPMC's chair of emergency medicine, was quoted as saying "We've learned that way more people, far, far more people have actually been exposed to the infection without any knowledge of it. That makes the overall death

¹ The Department of Health was not reporting this nursing home/personal care home data until we pressed. The Department will still not break the data down further as we have requested. Pennsylvania has four statutorily enacted and regulated facilities for aging seniors: personal care homes, assisted living residences, long term care nursing facilities and hospices. We presume but do not know that the term used by the Department includes the above. However, the term may just include "long term care nursing facilities" as defined under section 802.1 of the Healthcare Facilities (Act 48 of 1979) and "personal care homes" as defined under section 1001 the Human Services Code (Act of 1967).

² We found no available published information about the numbers of deaths by age. We found no published information about the comorbidities of those that have died attributable to COVID 19. We have repeatedly asked the Secretary of Health for this information to be published.

rate much lower ... Many people just didn't feel sick at all and recovered without difficulty." The article goes on, "Yealy further said the majority of the deaths among UPMC patients involved people over 80, with many being nursing home residents. ... What I suspect is COVID-19 will be a part of our experience treating patients for an extended [period of] months to maybe years."

The article also quoted Dr. Rachel Sackrowitz, the chief medical officer for UPMC's intensive care units. "Sackrowitz said she expects COVID-19 will be part of the ongoing 'disease burden' affecting Americans and, as with the flu, doctors will find treatments."

4) *Disregarding the impact on families.*

Mr. Secretary, do you not know the burden that you are placing and have placed on families? Pennsylvanians have an expectation, appropriately given the science and data, to expect a return to normalcy, although concededly a new normal.

Do you know the burden you are placing on folks who will want to return to the workforce in the fall? There are 1,672,000 unemployment compensation claims filed by our fellow citizens in Pennsylvania. As of Wednesday, April 29, 128,323 citizens have filed for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, which is available for self-employed workers, independent contractors and gig workers.

"The pandemic crisis now rests on a fulcrum. On one side is Covid-19 and every possible action that might prevent people from contracting and dying from infection. On the other side is everything else that matters: livelihoods that allow people to feed and shelter their families, civil liberties; the education of children, social well-being, including the prevention of loneliness, isolation and domestic violence; and all other medical conditions, from cancer and heart disease to dental emergencies" from the Wall Street Journal article Lockdowns Won't Stop the Spread by Joseph A. Ladapo, M.D. on April 9, 2020.

5) *Creating a safe plan for returning to schools by Labor Day.*

Why would you not be preparing plans to return our students to schools safely? How can you suggest that schools will not open in the fall? If that is the case, we the legislature and the citizens of Pennsylvania will have to rethink the entire delivery system of education to our students in Pennsylvania. Why have you not put together a plan now for the fall, one that reconfigures classrooms and class times, one that develops screening and testing protocols?

Furthermore, your assertion that urban and rural school districts do not have the funding they need to educate children is unfounded. The Pittsburgh School District spends \$25,460 per Average Daily Membership (ADM). By comparison, the two suburban school districts in my district spend \$19,158 per ADM at North Allegheny and \$17,503 at Pine-Richland. Harmony Area School District in rural Clearfield county spends \$21,422 per ADM.

6) *Kids have dreams.*

I will leave you with these thoughts Mr. Secretary. Kids have dreams. You are tearing those dreams away from them all over the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with your rash statements and judgments.

All kids have dreams, no matter their special needs, backgrounds, race, gender, age, and/or zip code. They work hard. Want to succeed. They enjoy playing instruments in real concerts and recitals. Act and sing in musicals. Build and construct. Weld. Learn about engines hands on. Show animals in 4-H contests. Compete in SkillsUSA competitions. Do lab experiments. Run track. Throw javelin. Play

The Honorable Secretary Pedro Rivera

May 2, 2020

Page 4

softball and baseball. Row. Swim. With innovation and common sense, these activities can be done safely.

Ask yourself, how many kids practiced for hours and hours and cannot find an outlet for their songs, their performance, their athletics, their science project presentations, their agriculture career development events, mock trials, speech and debate competitions, and business analysis presentations?

By Labor Day 2020, you will have had nearly six months to plan for a return to school. You and your office must work collaboratively with school superintendents and their administrators across the state to make plans for a safe fall return. If a school cannot do so, then that school should embrace the cyber charter school approach.

You are not working to find workable solutions given what is in front of us. Instead of providing direction and even hope, your statements are fostering depression, anxiety, and hopelessness. That is not the way to govern and lead.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Turzai". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Turzai
Speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Member, 28th Legislative District

cc: The Honorable Tom Wolf, Governor of Pennsylvania
Members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly