



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education  
In Pennsylvania**

**Submitted to the  
Senate Education Committee**

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**By**

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**&**

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On behalf of PSEA's 180,000 members, including nearly 1,500 employees of higher education institutions, thank you for your continued efforts to support public education during this pandemic. Maintaining level funding for one full year for K-12 and higher education in the FY 20-21 budget provides some level of much needed stability to both school districts and institutions of higher education as we continue to navigate this completely uncharted territory.

Last month PSEA testified before this committee about the urgent need for additional federal funding and supports for Pennsylvania's K-12 public schools to enact essential safety measures. That reality has not changed for those schools, but it may be even more dire for our colleges and universities. The size of their campuses, the numerous points of access to and from facilities, and the multitude of interactions that occur every day with other public and private partners from the community requires even more expansive supports to protect employees and students.

Unfortunately, however, the US Senate has still not taken any action to adopt a much-needed federal relief package for state and local governments and public education.

Our public colleges and universities are facing significant financial challenges requiring them to consider enacting severe cost-cutting measures and dipping into already reduced endowment funds (if they have any left). This only serves to further hamper and impair their ability to open safely as originally scheduled in the fall. Congress must step up and help bridge the existing funding gap between what can reasonably be provided at the local and state government level and the costs of what is essential to not further expose students, staff, and their communities to the deadly coronavirus.

Therefore, we urge the Committee and other state policymakers to advocate for additional federal funds to safely reopen our colleges and universities and ensure they *can remain open*. And, when Congress ultimately does step up and provide funding relief for public education, we ask that you work with key public higher education stakeholders to identify the most effective and prudent utilization of the dollars within the federal guidance – such as ensuring a portion of the funding is used for personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and essential student and staff support programs as you did with preK-12 federal funds in the recently adopted FY 20-21 state budget.

Without question, additional federal funds are critical to address the short-term needs of current students and faculty and ensure campus safety. But it also clear that investing in public higher education is the key to rebuilding PA's workforce and future economy. Our community colleges and public institutions of higher education are vital to the economic growth of the commonwealth, especially in times of economic downturn such as we are experiencing now. Community colleges, in particular, provide critical services helping workers build new skills, enhance existing ones, and transition back into the labor force. And, our community colleges will provide even more valuable resources during this time of economic insecurity when so many parents and adult students struggle to afford the cost of higher education. However, with an increase in demand comes additional challenges, and new protocols to keep students and employees safe.

Now, more than ever, PA must continue to invest in and build the capacity of our public system of higher education, especially to help meet the needs of workers suffering the effects of job loss and economic dislocation as a result of COVID-19. This includes essential supports for increasing access to high-quality broadband. Our community colleges are already leading the charge for ensuring equitable access to free Wi-Fi with various investments made from mapping parking lots to using limited endowment funds to purchase mobile access equipment for students. But this is only a band-aid. To ensure students remain enrolled and continue to progress towards the workforce, Pennsylvania must do more to enhance its broadband infrastructure.

And while our institutions are doing all that they can with limited resources to provide connectivity and high-quality online learning to students, faculty and students are eager to reopen their physical campuses given the valuable role campus connections play in the learning and success of students. Teaching and supporting students in person is the ideal for many of our students and faculty - but only if done in a way that does not temporarily - or worse, permanently - remove the teacher or student from the classroom due to COVID exposure.

The student-faculty relationship is important, but also all of those who have direct student interaction each day are as vital. Residence life, student services, financial aid, counseling services, and so much more are especially essential to our students.

In order to protect against expanded risk exposure, it is essential that PA's institutions of higher education have consistent and effective protections in place *before* sending faculty and other student-facing staff – many of whom are considered in higher-risk given their age – into the admissions offices, dining halls, classrooms, lecture halls, small seminar rooms and other common spaces of our campuses.

PSEA offers the following recommendations from our higher education members for the Committee's consideration as you continue to navigate this complex issue -

### **Facilities, Supplies, and Personnel**

- Adequate financial support to obtain, administer, and process diagnostic tests
- Adequate financial support for supplies and staffing for screening faculty, staff, and students regularly
- Adequate supply of personal protective equipment for all staff
- Adequate capacity for contact tracing
- Adequate financial support to reconfigure and retrofit (i.e. plexiglass barriers) campus spaces such as classrooms, dining halls, auditoriums, dormitories, and more for effective physical distancing
- Adequate cleaning supplies; time for deep cleaning; and sufficient staff for completing the essential regimen

### **Teaching, Learning, and Student Services**

- Supports for virtual learning – including devices, WiFi access, pedagogy, content and curriculum
- Needs for telework for employees
- Professional development, IT resources and supports

### **Ongoing Communication and Engagement**

- Continuous engagement with key stakeholders – particularly faculty and staff
- Continued needs assessment around virtual learning and telework and what that could mean for policies and practices
- Consistent communications with stakeholders and impacted parties, within applicable law and privacy policies

PSEA stands ready to work in collaboration with you and other stakeholders on the development and implementation of evidence-based, health-centered strategies tailored to keep each of our college campus communities safe.