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May 1, 2020

The Honorable Tom Wolf
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Office of the Governor
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Re: Morrisville School District

Dear Governor Wolf:

Thank you for your continued leadership during the current crisis. We are proud that Pennsylvania continues to lead the way in “flattening the curve”.

While the health and economic impact of the pandemic is, by necessity, occupying much of the attention of both your administration and the General Assembly at present, the Commonwealth’s constitutional obligation to provide “a thorough and efficient system of public education” to all of Pennsylvania’s children remains one of the central duties with which state government must concern itself. It is on that issue that we write.

We represent the Morrisville School District in the state legislature. In that regard, there are two, related concerns that we wish to bring to your attention. The first arises from a flaw in

the state's education funding formula for Morrisville that has caused a serious budget shortfall, which, if left unaddressed, will only grow in the coming years. The second is a more specific problem brought about by the need to close schools during the pandemic.

Like many older suburban communities, Morrisville has experienced a number of economic and demographic changes over the last few decades. Those changes have increased the cost of education in its public schools while shrinking the local tax base needed to fund that cost. Absent a proportional increase in the state's share of funding, the result has been an annual budget shortfall, despite the school board's prudent management of the district's finances.

To help address the problem, beginning in 2015, we began working with the district, legislative leadership and your administration to provide Morrisville's schools with \$1 million in supplemental funding each fiscal year to help bridge the gap. We are grateful for your help in that regard (we also wish to thank former Senator McIlhinney for his advocacy on the issue during his time in office). But the truth is that, while needed, that help has not been enough.

After a number of years of looking at this issue, we believe that much of the problem stems from an error in the way that both the existing and new funding formulas are calculated for Morrisville (a conclusion supported by the fact that even under the new, so-called fair funding formula, Morrisville actually receives *less* support from the state than under the older allocation). For the 2020-21 fiscal year, the formulas are based in part on a projected 5-year median household income in Morrisville of nearly \$75,000, well above some of the most challenged districts in the state. But that number is not accurate. It is not limited to the income of people living within the municipal – and, therefore, school district – boundaries of Morrisville Borough. Instead, it includes large numbers of residents in nearby Lower Makefield Township and Yardley Borough, who share the 19067 zip code with their neighbors in Morrisville. When looking only at Morrisville residents, the median household income drops to \$53,000. As a consequence of this apparent error, Morrisville School District has been unfairly underfunded for a number of years.

Even with the supplemental funding described above, this situation has made it increasingly difficult for the district to survive. For example, in the 2020-21 school year, the district is faced with a budget deficit of close to \$1.2 million, much of which is tied to special education costs (\$800,000), pension obligations (\$200,000) and charter school funding (\$100,000). To close that gap, the school board is considering raising taxes by 2.7%, which is on top of a 6.3% tax increase enacted to help close last year's budget deficit. Moreover, the board recently enacted an Economic Furlough Resolution, which would result in approximately \$1.3

million in savings. The proposed cuts include the elimination of the following positions and programs:

- The Assistant Principal;
- All kindergarten programming;
- All athletics;
- Electives at the middle and high schools;
- Fine arts and music programs;
- A media specialist position;
- Four support staff positions; and
- An administrative staff position.

Like you, each of us has fought for increased funding in education during our time serving in the legislature not only to avoid these kinds of cuts, but to enhance educational opportunities for all of Pennsylvania's children. As we are sure you can appreciate, we cannot sit by passively while this happens to any district in our state let alone to one of our own. Toward that end, we make the following requests to address this problem:

- that PDE be directed to begin looking at Morrisville's funding formula so that corrections can be made when the Funding Commission meets next year, if it is not possible to do so sooner; and
- that, in the interim, Morrisville's base funding be increased in an amount sufficient to bridge the current shortfall and allow the school district to avoid the staffing and programing cuts contemplated in its Economic Furlough Resolution.

The second issue that we wish to raise concerns distance learning. Morrisville School District applied for the Continuity of Education and Equity Grant (CEEG) to help fund the purchase of Chromebooks and hotspots to help the 600 or so students – out of a total of about 800 – who currently do not have the resources to participate in distance learning. At present, most students are working either through a smartphone or with printed packets. Those fortunate enough to be able to access Google Classroom are limited to working on assignments for enrichment and review, without the presence of a teacher; participation is optional. Despite these facts, the district's CEEG application was denied. We suspect that the denial was the result of the same flaw in calculating the level of need in Morrisville described above. In light of that fact, we ask that an amount equivalent to what the district would have received under the CEEG

program, but for that error, be given to it as soon as possible so that Morrisville can purchase the needed equipment in time to cover the remainder of this school year.

Again, we want to thank you for your administration's work in keeping the people of Pennsylvania safe during this public health crisis. We appreciate your consideration of our requests for the assistance that the Morrisville School District so dearly needs and deserves.

Very truly yours,



Steve Santarsiero, 10th Senate District



Perry Warren, 31st House District



John Galloway, 140th House District

cc: Hon. Pedro A. Rivera, Secretary of Education
Senator Pat Browne, Majority Appropriations Chair
Senator Vince Hughes, Minority Appropriations Chair
Representative Stan Saylor, Majority Appropriations Chair
Representative Matt Bradford, Minority Appropriations Chair
Damon Miller, Morrisville School Board President
Ted Parker, Morrisville Borough Council President
Dave Rivella, Morrisville Mayor