



**AFT Pennsylvania**  
*A Union of Professionals*

**AFT Pennsylvania**  
**President Arthur Steinberg**

*Testimony for the*  
*Basic Education Funding Commission*

*Thursday, September 14, 2023 | Written Testimony*

Good afternoon, members of the General Assembly and designees of Governor Shapiro's Administration. Thank you for allowing me to testify today to the needs of our schools in addressing childhood trauma and mental health.

I'm Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the state chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents about 36,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, school staff, higher education faculty and staff, and state workers across 64 local unions.

As this committee considers the basic funding needs of the Commonwealth's 499 school districts, it is vital to understand the ever-changing needs of our students that are a result of chronic underfunding. It is the underfunding of our schools that made it difficult or impossible to safely return to in-person learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>i</sup> it is the underfunding of our schools that makes it difficult to attract and retain teachers in the profession, and it is the underfunding of our schools that has ultimately not supplied the support system needed to improve the mental health of our young people.

The depth and breadth of the student mental health crisis may not yet be determined, but it is our members—educators, paraprofessionals, staff, and school counselors—who encounter the brunt of the effects each day. In fact, more than 75% of schools surveyed last year said, "their teachers and staff have voiced concerns about student depression, anxiety, and trauma."<sup>ii</sup>

In addition to the disconnectedness experienced by students during the pandemic, the ongoing gun violence epidemic causes continued harm to the mental health of our students—whether they live in a community ravaged by gun violence, have lost a family member to a gun crime, or if they are afraid of the ever-too-common shootings that occur in schools.<sup>iii</sup>

Incredibly, "some [70% of children](#) in the U.S. who seek and receive mental health support get it at school."<sup>iv</sup> But schools struggle to address these needs. The recommended ratio is 250 students for every school counselor, but in the US, the average is 415 to 1. When it comes to school psychologists, the numbers are much worse. In Pennsylvania, the ratio of students to school psychologists is 1038 to 1, over twice the recommendation.<sup>v</sup>

The good news is that we can change the trajectory of mental health in our schools through smart investment. The American Federation of Teacher's long-held belief is that community schools are a path toward filling the educational, physical, mental health, and equity gaps that have widened through lack of funding.

Not to be confused with traditional neighborhood public schools, community schools leverage community partnerships to provide on-site, wrap around services aligned with student and family needs. Community school buildings are open before school, after school, weekends and summers. Common aspects of community schools are integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice.<sup>vi</sup>

Strong evidence of improving health, including the mental health of students in community schools comes from the literature on school-based health centers (SBHCs). These school-based health centers have been shown to contribute to improved access to mental health services for students which, in turn, has been associated with students being less likely to use or abuse substances such as marijuana and alcohol, less likely to carry a weapon, and less likely to fight. Students who used SBHCs were found to have increased attendance compared to nonusers, and students who used mental health services of SBHCs demonstrated achievement increases compared to nonusers.<sup>vii</sup>

Many community schools already exist, including here in Philadelphia, in Pittsburgh, and elsewhere across the nation in cities and towns like Oakland, Boston, Cincinnati, and New York. There are dozens of successful examples of community schools that have helped buoy student achievement and the health of families and communities.

But we don't need to go to Oakland, Boston, Cincinnati, or New York for examples of successful community schools. In Pittsburgh, Faison K-5 and Langley preK-8 are standout examples of programs which focus on academics, enrichment, health and social supports, youth and community development and family engagement. We would be happy to arrange for members of this commission to visit one of these outstanding community schools to help shed light on their benefits to kids and communities.

Funding exists for these services. In fact, the Biden Administration has already secured \$150 million to assist states and local education agencies with setting up full-service community schools.<sup>viii</sup> To address the ongoing and, unfortunately, increasing mental health needs in our schools, the public education system in Pennsylvania needs funds to invest in wraparound services such as mental health supports, dental services, and assistance with shelter and nutrition.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/27/health/schools-indoor-air-covid.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-worse-than-we-realize/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/school-shootings-and-student-mental-health.p>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/the-benefits-of-mental-health-programs-in-schools>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5126019/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/18/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-efforts-to-support-community-schools/>