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Testimony of the Education Law Center Philadelphia City Council Hearing on the Philadelphia School District and Board of Education

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My name is Reynelle Brown Staley, and I am Policy Director at the Education Law Center (“ELC”). ELC is a legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania’s children have access to quality public education, particularly those most educationally “at risk” including children living in poverty, children of color, children experiencing homelessness, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, immigrant students, English learners, and LGBTQ students.

Advocating on behalf of schoolchildren in Philadelphia is central to our work, not only because of the size and scale of the district but because the district and the students it serves have been historically underserved by the state public education system. As a statewide advocacy organization, we understand that Harrisburg has not – and often still does not – look favorably upon Philadelphia or understand its educational needs. So we are pleased to speak today about the issues affecting our local school board.

At the heart of most challenges affecting our schools is a question of resources, both whether they are available for the students and schools that need them most and how effectively they are spent. The fact that Philadelphia schools simply don’t have enough resources is in part a Harrisburg problem, but it’s one that we locally can play a bigger role in affecting. All of us need to demand more of our state lawmakers with respect to their support of Philadelphia students. We must demand that they be strong advocates for providing the new Board of Education the state resources they desperately need to be successful. It will take initiative and leadership from all of us here and our elected representatives to build an effective statewide movement for adequate and equitable public-school funding.

Restoring public trust and ensuring transparency in our school governance requires clear, compelling, and coordinated action by the Board of Education, Mayor, and City Council. Together, these entities must show that local educational resources will be directed with purpose, with integrity, and in line with community needs and priorities. This requires responding to concerns about school climate, inadequate social service supports, and other priorities identified in the Mayor’s Office of Education’s 2018 Community Survey.¹ It also involves addressing the needs of student groups that are frequently marginalized, historically underserved, and rarely recognized as educational priorities, such as English learners and pregnant and parenting teens.

¹ Mayor’s Office of Education (2018). 2018 Community Survey on Education, available at <https://www.phila.gov/media/20180214160250/Community-Survey-on-Education-MOE-2018.pdf>.

We remain far from the point Philadelphia School Board Member Mallory Fix Lopez suggested the district should be where all Philadelphia schoolteachers consider themselves English as a Second Language (ESOL) instructors equipped to meet the needs of English learner and limited English proficient families. The district's 15,000 English Learners speak more than 100 home languages, creating the need for robust interpretation and translation services for students and their families.

In addition, teen pregnancy rates are far higher in Philadelphia than state and national averages.² Teen parents account for 30% of all dropouts, and roughly 70% of all pregnant and parenting teens in Philadelphia are likely to drop out.³

Addressing these longstanding challenges requires a commitment at all levels of our school governance system. Whether it's bilingual interpreters, counseling assistants, and evaluators for EL students or academic support for parenting teens during the critical weeks after childbirth,⁴ meeting the educational needs of the most underserved students requires both significant funding commitments from the Mayor and Council as well as policy and practice changes within the district. This is the type of clear, compelling, and coordinated action we need.

We urge you to consider EL students, pregnant and parenting teens, and needs of other marginalized student groups, including students with disabilities, and highly mobile students in our dependency and delinquency systems and those experiencing homelessness as you develop your plans for the improvement and benefit of public education in Philadelphia. And we look forward to partnering with you to ensure access to quality public education for all Philadelphia students. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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² Philadelphia Department of Public Health (2017). Vital Statistics Report, 2014, available at <https://www.phila.gov/departments/department-of-public-health/>; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescence Health, Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs, Successful Strategies available at <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/tpp-ss-phmc-2018.pdf>.

³ "Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Philadelphia - Academic and Social Outcomes" February 2010 at <http://www.philaedfund.org/sites/default/files/Pregnant%20and%20Parenting%20Teens%20in%20Philadelphia--%20Academic%20and%20Social%20Outcomes.pdf> ; Teen Pregnancy's High Cost, Philadelphia Inquirer, August 2012 at http://articles.philly.com/2012-08-30/news/33477284_1_teen-mothers-teen-pregnancy-rate-teen-births

⁴ ELC has specific comprehensive recommendations to improve educational outcomes for pregnant and parenting students which were developed as a result of a multi-year project focused on this vulnerable student cohort.