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Education Law Center Statement on Pennsylvania General Assembly Adoption of FY21 Budget

Deborah Gordon Klehr, executive director of the Education Law Center, issued the following statement on the budget adopted by the General Assembly this week:

“We welcome the news from the General Assembly that state funding for basic education, special education, and pre-K in the coming school year will not be reduced from current levels, despite the dropoff in state revenues. Schools are already facing substantial decreases in revenue from local sources due to the economic downturn – as well as added costs associated with COVID-19 and the shift to remote learning.

“Pennsylvania legislators recognized that not subjecting our schools to any further cuts was a necessity. This is a sign of progress, reflecting years of advocacy about the importance of state education funding. But much work remains to address both new challenges presented by COVID-19 and longstanding issues of inadequate and inequitable school funding.

“The effects of the current economic crisis and the costs of the pandemic are already devastating to many school districts – particularly to the low-wealth districts that have little or no cushion and bare-bones staffing, where there is nothing to cut.

“We must promptly find ways to provide additional support to the struggling, underfunded school districts whose students have been hardest hit by this crisis. Tapping the \$3.9 billion in federal CARES Act aid earmarked to help Pennsylvania deal with the effects of the coronavirus is a critical first step. A portion of those dollars should go to help schools cope with growing needs and cover costs like facilities issues, special education, summer learning, compensatory education services, and computer/internet access for students.

“But more federal funding is also needed, as the federal aid provided to schools so far is a small fraction of what was provided during the last great recession. Our Congressional representatives must promptly pass an additional, robust federal aid package addressing the need for funding to state and local governments, support for school districts, and closing the digital divide.

“In addition, our state officials must develop a long-term solution to Pennsylvania’s inadequate and inequitable funding system. That is the goal of our ongoing lawsuit against state officials, aimed at ensuring fair and adequate funding for all Pennsylvania students, as our state constitution mandates.

“We look forward to working with Pennsylvania officials on additional measures to ensure that students and districts have the resources they need to succeed.”

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The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness. For more information, visit elc-pa.org.