

# PA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION BUDGET HEARING WRAP

## Monday, February 24, 2025



### General Overview:

Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Acting Secretary Dr. Carrie Rowe and senior PDE staff testified before the House Appropriations Committee today. House Republicans focused questions on accountability within the “historic education funding” levels the governor has requested the last several years, how we can focus on student-centered education, and why the governor has failed to provide a long-term funding plan for education.

### Key Takeaways:

- “It’s more complicated than simply adding additional funding,” the PDE acting secretary stated, shedding light on the intricate nature of school funding and why increases do not directly correlate to better test scores.
  - The acting PDE secretary conceded that more funding does not equate to better student outcomes. When asked what parents with students in failing schools can do right now to find a school that fits their needs, the acting secretary pointed to the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTC) program, a program championed by Republicans in the General Assembly over the past several years.
  - Committee members expressed frustration with the funding disparity among the various rural, suburban and urban districts, highlighting the urgent need for a more equitable system.
  - Many school districts are sitting on significant budgetary reserves. The PDE acting secretary argued that school districts need to keep reserves in the event of a late state budget. However, the Shapiro funding plan does not consider district reserves. It is worth noting the governor is once again proposing to spend the state’s General Fund surplus and now the Rainy Day Fund to balance this budget. The Shapiro Administration’s stance appears to be in conflict with the acting PDE secretary’s statement on reserves that, “to deplete it to zero would be irresponsible.”
- Members expressed frustration over the incomplete financial statements presented as part of Governor Shapiro’s budget. PDE’s budget projections unrealistically show a flatlining of PreK-12 education spending over the next four years.
  - The governor’s PDE budget projections continue the trend of underestimating expenditures in future years, thereby providing the illusion of a balanced five-year financial statement.
  - PDE indicated that flat projections for future years are intended to allow the General Assembly to make decisions on funding levels. Committee members suggested this means the governor will support whatever funding levels the General Assembly chooses to allocate in the coming years.
- When asked what data was used to determine that a cyber charter school should be reimbursed \$8,000 per student in the governor’s budget, PDE could not provide specific data behind this decision.
- Committee members asked for an update on the number of students on a waitlist for Career and Technical Education opportunities. PDE did not have any information to share at the hearing and has pledged to follow up.
- Committee members questioned the rationale for using funds from the Public School Facility Improvement line-item for solar projects rather than school improvements such as roof replacements, HVAC system, lead paint, and asbestos mitigation.
- Committee members expressed concerns about school districts’ management of pupil transportation dollars, especially for charter school students.

**Notable Q&A:**



The PDE Acting Secretary admits to Rep. Marci Mustello that more education funding does not correlate to better test scores.

Rep. Kristin Marcell asks how many students are currently waiting for open slots at career and technical education centers.



Rep. Eric Davanzo asks for the rationale behind using Public School Facility Improvement dollars for solar panels.

Rep. Ryan Warner asks which school districts currently have budgetary reserves and why reserves are not an aspect of the state funding formula.



Rep Eric Nelson discusses issues around pupil transportation for students in charter schools.

Rep. Josh Kail pressed the PDE acting secretary on why the governor's budget proposal does not realistically project future education spending.

