

# public citizens for children + youth

**Testimony to Town Hall Hosted by Philadelphia City Councilperson, Helen Gym**

**Submitted by Donna Cooper**

**Executive Director, Public Citizens for Children and Youth**

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First of all, I want to go on record and thank the U.S. Congress for keeping the Phila School District afloat in this terrible pandemic. As a result of COVID, the District's revenues took a hit of \$100 million simply because the bars and restaurants were closed so we drank less and we could not attend sports games at our arenas. In addition, the City wisely suspended the reassessment, costing the district \$30 million, and for obvious reasons Use and Occupancy revenues also tanked by approximately \$20 million.

Meanwhile COVID caused charter costs to grow with a 26% increase in charter enrollment, of which 21% were students who shifted from private or parochial schools to attend charters. As a result the district had to pay charters about \$20 million more than expected this year. To top that off, the state flat-funded the district, dumping all the cost of state mandated charters and pension payments on the district.

Against this backdrop, thankfully the first two CARES packages delivered \$672 million and saved the district from any layoffs. And, of course, it covered new costs for masks, sanitizer, and facilities improvements. While transportation and utilities savings did accrue, those savings also helped balance the books for the current school year.

I think it's important to go over those facts so that every parent and taxpayer is clear how the first two CARES packages saved our district. I encourage Council and the District to be transparent about how these emergency relief funds are being spent. A handy chart from the District to be shared with the taxpayers would help that cause.

Moving to the latest round relief, the District will receive \$1.27 billion, Philly charter schools will receive \$474 million and the statewide cyber charters also get a boon of \$172 million.

The District basically has three and a half years to spend the funds starting with this school year.



990 Spring Garden Street  
Suite 200  
Philadelphia, PA 19123

215-563-5848 Office  
215-563-9442 Fax  
info@pccy.org Email

@pccyteam  
facebook.com/PCCYPage

[pccy.org](http://pccy.org)

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The District's lumpsum budget released last week proposed spending \$852 million in three big buckets:

- \$350 million for academic related investments
- \$150 million for social emotional learning supports
- \$325 million for facilities improvement, a great move given the extraordinary needs

Their plan also includes spending for technology, digital access support and spending to avoid leveling through 2024. So far, the amounts to be spent on these costs are not specified. As such, its hard to say where the balance of the \$400 million of Rescue Act funds will be spent.

To be sure, the District is in the very early stage of the budget process, but we must do all we can to responsibly allocate 100% of the Rescue Act funds in an additive manner – on top of expected district spending, not supplanting it. Our goal should be to ensure that the loss of student learning is not simply remedied by these federal funds. Instead, it should be that our students get the real benefits of building back better and their learning rebounds to higher levels than pre-pandemic. That must be our goal.

Of the allocations released, the District is doing exactly what PCCY has already asked school leaders to do, which is to spend a majority of the funds directly on student learning and student supports. We need assurance, however, that when all the funds are allocated, they too follow this same pattern of allocating 60% of the funds to student-centered investments on top of expected district expenditures for academics and student supports.

There are a few other principles with respect to this spending that we must adopt. The first is that we must front load these expenditures. In my estimation the District should be spending at least 50% of the funds in the next twelve months.

To start with, the District should be offering every student the chance to attend in-person summer school, this summer. While many students may not avail themselves of summer learning, every student should immediately be offered the chance to catch up. I know there are huge complexities here, but if we create a vaccine in just months that can save the world from the worst virus in 100 years, we certainly have the brain power, and now with the Rescue Act, the resources, to open the doors to our schools this summer to 70,000 students at a minimum. Research tells us that with 90 hours of instruction in the summer we can make a real difference. That's six weeks of half day classes. This is a "must-do" if our students are to return to school in September having matriculated to the next grade.



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Speaking of matriculating, the District should also be explicitly asking parents if they want their child promoted and offer professionals to help parents make the best decision for their child with webinars and workshops. An assumed “COVID social promotion policy” will mean a high rate of student failure in the years ahead. If we promote children not ready for the next grade, especially in these conditions, we do them a terrible disservice.

That takes me to another key principle which is increasing the number of adults in our schools next year. Students are going to need more help in every class. Recognizing that these are temporary one-time funds, and we are in an emergency situation, we believe the District needs to offer two-year contracts for Education Corps staff, who for the next two years will help our students recover and get ahead. Corps member should have college degrees, and over this summer be trained to be needed extra eyes, ears, hands and help for students in the upcoming school year and the next. Of course, there is a role for tutoring during free periods and afterschool as well. But students will need help to succeed while in class, or the social emotional stress they suffered this year will simply be compounded by the return to in-person instruction.

We also need to prepare now for the possibility that social distancing and hybrid instruction might need to continue. If it does, every student in every grade must be offered in-person instruction. Rescue Act funds must be reserved for this year only, for the possibility of needing to rent space and hire even more staff so that every student can go to school at least two days, if not five, a week. Planning for the worst-case scenario in this case, is a social justice must!

Finally, I want to be clear that the City also received Rescue Act funds that I believe should be deployed this summer at scales never seen before for a half day summer enrichment program for every child who attends the half day summer school and even for those who don't. The pandemic took a terrible toll on children and with these one-time funds we can give them the best summer of their lives, something they all need and deserve, and nothing should get in our way of doing so.



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