

CUTTING EXPENDITURES WILL BALANCE THE BUDGET
BUT MAKE EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS MORE DIFFICULT
MORE REVENUE IS IMPERATIVE

Statement of Michael Churchill, Chief Counsel, Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia
To the State Reform Commission, November 10, 2006

I want to start where Commissioner Glenn left off two days ago, the need to move beyond thinking only about what to cut. Because that is the path of retrenchment and retreat and doom for our children.

Of course you must make some cuts. In doing so, as all the parents have said, you must not cut services which directly impact student achievement. Furthermore, it is not enough to believe you have done that, but you must demonstrate that, by being completely transparent and open about the impact of each cut you do make, because you need every ally you can recruit, not just to fix the hole in your budget and stand still, but in order to move forward and find more revenue.

As you well know, smaller classes, smaller schools, more school time through extended days and summer classes, and more training around a consistent curriculum have been the engines which have driven improved school performance these last four years. (Rev. Weeks eloquently described this as increased consistency in the lives of students.)

This Commission and its CEO have done a superb job of stretching limited resources and redirecting it to instructional improvement. But this deficit shows the limits its faces. Class sizes have risen back to their contractual limits, threatening the long run success of this Commission. It is time to address the issue of whether more revenue is needed-- not just to balance the budget, but to accomplish the goals and mission of this Commission.

This School District remains inadequately funded for the task confronting it, and you need to say so. It is no secret that it is being asked to do more, with less. Although it has more students living in poverty, with families unable to provide out of school support, with special education needs, with special language needs, it has less funds per student than its neighbors who do not face such extensive challenges.

If Philadelphia had the same funding as the average of the top 100 districts in the state, it would have \$2,709 more per student, totaling \$571 million. That is \$82,000 per classroom of 30. This would wipe out the deficit, it would reduce class size, it would fund the debt service on an adequate construction budget, it would provide the 9th grade support services you have just sidelined, it would allow us to restore our libraries and art and music programs and to be a superior school district, because I believe we have the talent and knowledge-- in this room and throughout the district -- to be that, a superior district, but we just don't have the resources.

Fortunately, we do not have to go to Harrisburg as if this were a Philadelphia only

problem, because a majority of the districts (304) have gaps even greater than ours, and three quarters of the state's districts have gaps of \$2,000 or more. I have attached that list for your review and use.

I call upon you to become pro active in this matter. The Governor has said that he wants to fix the state's education funding inadequacy this coming year, and the Mayor told you that you should come knocking on his door.

To do this you should:

1. Develop the budget that you think you need for reform: how much will it cost to cut classes to the below 20 that is available in most suburbs and the 17-18 that research shows is necessary in the first 4 years; how much for new construction to house those classes; how much to get counselors to the level they can be effective at keeping students in school, etc. To bolster your credibility bring in the major business leaders to vet and vouch for the numbers.

2. Immediately invite the leaders of the other districts— the Presidents of the school boards and the Superintendents—from around the state who have substantial gaps on that list I have given to you to come to Philadelphia and meet with you to organize a lobbying effort which will benefit all of you, so this no longer becomes Philadelphia against the rest of the state, but the rest of the state with Philadelphia. Devise a bill which will fairly help all and get behind it.

3. Investigate with City Council what it will take to bring up the City's level of local support to be consistent with the average tax burden in the state.

While much of Comptroller Butkowitz's remarks were misguided and focus on reducing resources available for the district rather than increasing them, he is right in saying that you are late in developing a plan to replace the operating funds supplied by the bond issue. You need a plan that comprehensively details the revenues you need to make this a successful school district, where all children are flourishing, not just the 40 percent who are currently succeeding. That would be a sad and unacceptable place to stop. So tell us what it will really cost to do the job that you have been entrusted with—successfully educating all of your students. Your plan needs to be developed publicly, with community involvement and with transparency, so that you can mobilize the public and gain the support which will make increased revenue a reality.

Each of you were appointed and accepted your appointment because you have a commitment to success and a willingness to make the hard decisions necessary to that success. Further gains in student performance is dependent upon reducing class size to the levels of our neighbors, and it is obvious as you struggle with this deficit that “revenue enhancement” is a necessity to accomplish that task — that is your real job, not reducing services to our kids. We must cease being a “have not” district. I am sure everyone in this room will join with me in saying that if you will lead towards that goal, we will follow, and together we will succeed.