

Written Testimony

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Before the House Committee on Education and Labor Hearing on Underpaid Teachers and Crumbling Schools: How Underfunding Public Education Shortchanges America's Students

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on this panel to share the perspective of parents and families on the lack of investments and resources for our nation's students, teachers and schools. I am speaking on behalf of National PTA, the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association with congresses in all 50 states, DC, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Europe. Since 1897, National PTA has been a strong advocate, a reputable resource for empowering all families to effectively engage in their child's education and works to ensure every child has the resources and supports to reach their fullest potential.

The long-term success of our nation depends on robust and equitable public investments in our education system. Our system of public education is the major vehicle for perpetuating the basic values of a democratic system of government. Public education must be strengthened, continue to be governed by public officials who are accountable to the public and funded fairly. National PTA has long-advocated to ensure all children have access to equitably funded public schools that improve their overall well-being and help them achieve academic success. From a lack of textbooks and lab equipment and crumbling infrastructure to not enough school counselors to support students and provide mental health services, there have been far too many children left with insufficient resources. This is why National PTA and its 3.5 million members across the country advocate to ensure schools have the proper resources needed to help every child learn, grow and succeed.

While I come to you today as the Vice President of Membership of National PTA, the most important role I have is mom and grandmother. I am the proud mother of Annalishia, Anthony, and Glenn II and grandmother to A'Mari, D'Mario, Lykel, Alani, Alina, A'Nyla, Avianace, Aniyah, Amiyah. Like me, every parent wants their child to be successful. As an association, we want all kids to be successful, not just one school or one group of kids. State and federal policymakers must support and enact policies that enable the success of all children. That's why I am here today to speak for every child with one voice on the need to adequately fund our nation's public schools.

In 2002, my daughter Annalishia was a freshman at Frederick A. Douglass High School in Oklahoma City. One day Annalishia came home and told me she didn't have homework. I came to learn that it wasn't that Annalishia didn't have homework, it was because she could not do

her homework. Annalishia and all her 9th grade classmates did not have regular access to textbooks for their English class. There were some books available for the students to use in class, but they were old, pages were missing, students had to share them during class and no one could take them home to do their homework.

As a mom, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had to speak up for not only Annalishia, but all the kid's in my daughter's class. I wasn't sure where to start, so I talked to three moms whose kids ran track with Annalishia. We decided to first meet with the teacher who told us what she had for textbooks. She then directed us to speak with someone at the school district who oversaw textbooks. I was thinking to myself, is there a textbook man or woman? We went to the school district and they told us they didn't have the money for additional textbooks and that we needed to go to the school board. So, off us four moms went to a school board meeting. At the first meeting we attended they told us we could only have three total minutes between the four of us. We gave our collective three minutes of testimony that day and then showed up at every subsequent school board meeting to speak. We sent emails every day to school board members. We reached out to all the 9th grade parents to let them know that their child didn't have an English textbook. Then lots of parents were calling school board members advocating for textbooks. Finally, our calls for action were heeded and funding was allocated to purchase textbooks for every student in 9th grade English. It took 7 months, but our children received textbooks and the district superintendent placed parents on committees to ensure parents and families were at the decision-making table. I never felt so empowered.

However, 17 years later, the same equity challenges remain. Teachers in Oklahoma walked out of classrooms in April 2018 for the same reason I started advocating for in 2002—underfunding and a lack of resources to meet the needs of all students. We can't continue to repeat this same vicious cycle.

The school district where my children attended school and my grandkids currently attend consists of approximately 85–90% of children of color and is in the process of closing under-resourced schools throughout the district, particularly on the Southside and Northeast side of the district as well as Spencer—high poverty schools with large African American and Latino populations. The goal of the closures is to integrate and place students in lower income communities in better resourced schools. While it's the right thing to do under our current circumstances in Oklahoma City, it has divided the community and created "othering"—wealthy parents don't want their kids to go to school with those "other kids." I am frustrated that our school district must close neighborhood schools because they are underfunded and bus students across the city. All schools—including the public schools in poor neighborhoods—deserve adequate and appropriate funding.

Equity challenges in Oklahoma City are a microcosm of underfunding statewide: Oklahoma ranks 47th in per pupil spending, funding has been cut steadily, and teachers are underpaid. Analysis from the Oklahoma State School Boards Association shows that Oklahoma invests \$1,600 less per average than a cohort of surrounding states—Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, New Mexico and Colorado. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the

state of Missouri has 229,274 more students than Oklahoma and spends more on each student than Oklahoma by \$2,156.

One glaring area is school facilities. According to the 2016 State of Our Schools: America's K-12 Facilities report, Oklahoma is one of 12 states that provides no funding to local education agency (LEA) capital construction costs to build, improve and renovate schools. While areas like Oklahoma City and Tulsa can use bonds to try to close the gap, other parts of the state are in disrepair and are too poor to finance through bonds. This places tremendous constraints on the ability of Oklahoma schools to keep pace with technology as well as provide safe and modern learning environments for our children. In particular, this problem is especially damaging in the rural areas of our state where schools are serving high need and American Indian students and where poorer districts do not have the tax base or economy of scale to have sufficient capital funds.

In addition to our poor facility funding, we have other serious fiscal needs in Oklahoma. This is evidenced from the record number of educators who have run for public office to demand more resources for our state's public schools. In Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), 12% of our teachers have no training because underinvestment in our teachers has put districts in the position of hiring emergency certified teachers. About 42% of our teachers are have 0-3 years of experience and most don't stay 5 years. In contrast, almost 1 in 4 of our teachers is eligible to retire. This talent crisis in our classrooms is hurting kids and will be felt for generations if we don't think about teacher training and compensation differently. While recent marches, strikes and protests in Oklahoma City secured more investment from state, it is not enough.

Decades of state and federal underinvestment in children—and public education in specific—has created unsustainable situations. Our children see their value in the schools they attend, and all students should feel valued because all students can achieve.

As a grandparent now, I see my children fighting the same fights and facing the same challenges in education I went through years ago. It's frustrating. We must do better. We have to do better. Our nation's future depends on it. It is our nation's public schools that will provide the educated, innovative and creative workforce of tomorrow—the entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, artists, political leaders who will ensure that our nation will flourish in an increasingly competitive global economy. However, this is only possible with a strong and rigorous public education system coupled with support and adequate funding. We must invest more in education. PTA appreciates Congress' recent increases in education funding, however student and educator needs are still not met. National PTA has several recommendations that I strongly urge you to consider.

First, Congress must raise discretionary spending caps. Without an increase in discretionary spending caps, domestic spending will endure a \$55 billion cut. This will translate into a nearly \$20 billion cut in education, health and workforce funding. Overall, the budget caps would cause a 10% reduction in annual discretionary spending. Imagine 10% less IDEA funding or

spending to support professional development for teachers. I urge you to make raising the budget caps your number one priority in the early days of this Congress.

Second, Congress needs to better fund critical programs in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In particular, Congress must ensure programs that support low-income students and students with disabilities, such as Title I and state grants for special education services, receive substantial funding. Additionally, more resources need to be provided for educator professional development in Title II, English learners in Title III, safe and supportive schools, technology and access to college and career counseling, STEM, music and arts, civics, IB/AP, computer science through Title IV-A, and family engagement in education in Title IV-E.

In recent years, Title I funding has remained around the same level, despite the increase in K-12 public school enrollment and growing number of low-income students attending public schools. The disparity between current Title I funding levels and the additional cost of ensuring all students receive a high-quality education means that the federal government has essentially enacted cuts to the Title I program.

For instance, from 2010 to 2015, low-income student enrollment grew by 4%, becoming the majority of public school students. Despite the increase in low-income student enrollment, Title I funding for schools essentially remained the same, meaning there were less funds to go to a larger number of students. This decreased Title I funding in almost half of the states and U.S. territories. When adjusted for inflation and taking into account reservations required by federal law, it's been an actual cut to Title I-A at the local level. Congress must fully fund Title I to meet the increasing number of low-income students and supports needed to ensure all schools regardless of zip code are equitably funded.

Additionally, IDEA state grant funding has remained around the same level even though the number of students with disabilities attending public schools has increased by more than 2%. This has actually resulted in a net cut to special education funding, bringing the percentage of the federal commitment to 14.9% out of the 40% promised by Congress. The disparity between current IDEA funding levels and the additional cost of ensuring that all students receive a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) means that the federal government has essentially enacted cuts to the IDEA program. Congress promised to fully fund IDEA and they must follow through on that promise. Our association urges Congress to put IDEA on a path to full funding. PTA has consistently supported the IDEA Full Funding Act and looks forward to working in a bipartisan manner to pass this legislation. We also call on Congress to increase investment in IDEA early intervention services.

Congress should also increase its investment in family engagement through the Statewide Family Engagement Centers program in Title IV-E of ESSA. This reenergized initiative, receiving funding in fiscal year 2018 for the first time in 8 years, is assisting parent centers in 13 states around the country to ensure families can engage with their child's school and support their education. Unfortunately, due to funding constraints not all states have been able to benefit

from this program. We urge Congress to increase funding to at least \$15 million in FY 2020 and put this program on a funding path to ensure all states can benefit in the coming years.

Lastly, Congress must ensure that public schools are included in any infrastructure package which Congress considers later this year. Schools are a critical part of our nation's infrastructure and it is essential that investments are made to repair, renovate and modernize school facilities to ensure they are safe, healthy and well-equipped to advance student achievement, grow our economy and improve our competitiveness. PTA is pleased to support the Rebuild America's Schools Act so that all districts in Oklahoma and across the country can provide the education that children deserve in safe and welcoming school buildings. Our association urges bipartisan support of improved school facilities and infrastructure to ensure safe, modern, healthy, energy efficient schools for our students.

As you consider these requests, it is important to keep in mind that federal funding for public education programs has remained at approximately 2% of the federal budget for decades, despite the increase in public school enrollment and the rising cost of education resources and services. When accounting for inflation, enrollment, and student needs, federal investment in K-12 remains lower than pre-recession levels. Recent polling from POLITICO and Harvard University found that almost three-fourths of the public identified increased federal spending on public elementary and secondary education as an "extremely important priority." It's time we prioritize our investments in our children.

Budgeting is a reflection of priorities. In Oklahoma and across the nation, our priority should be investment in children. All schools should be equally resourced, and Congress must do its part to make every child's potential a reality.

I welcome all of you here today to become members of the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association – PTA.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to testify on behalf of our nation's children and families for increased investments in public education. I am happy to answer any questions.