



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Jerry T. Jordan, President | March 2, 2023 | 2:30 PM

“First Step Plan” Budget

Good afternoon, and thank you Senator Hughes for convening this important event to draw attention to an issue that is near and dear to all of us— public education.

We are at a moment in time where we must answer a fundamental question: are we, or are we not, serious about a collective commitment to a better tomorrow?

Because if we are, then the path forward is clear. Here are the facts:

- Pennsylvania's children—every single one of them—are entitled to a thorough and efficient system of public education. Not only have we known this for years, but this enshrined constitutional right is now affirmed by the courts.
- But Pennsylvania's system of education funding, as it is currently, is woefully inadequate in meeting its constitutional and moral obligation.
- Too many children have, for decades, been short changed because of a system of school funding that penalizes poverty and that stacks the deck against Black and brown children.
- And there is no more disgraceful example of this injustice in the physical buildings in which we expect children to learn in and staff to work in each day.

Just yesterday, Building 21, a West Oak Lane High School, was forced into virtual learning because of a significant asbestos hazard. I cannot emphasize enough the seriousness of this issue.

You don't have to look any further than our veteran educator Lea DiRusso, forced into early retirement after a mesothelioma diagnosis brought on by teaching in classrooms with known, damaged asbestos.

This closure is emblematic of our ongoing fight for equitable school funding. Every day, we continue to have to fight so hard for something so fundamental: that our young people and their educators are not poisoned when entering their school buildings.

So to think that once again, students and staff have been put at risk is simply unconscionable— and now we know it's unconstitutional, too.

While I appreciate the District's alerting the union about the issue and their move to close the building, the fact that this is even an issue that we have to face in the year 2023 is reprehensible.

We are at a pivotal moment in time. We know the money is there. We know that there are legislative solutions, like the one you heard about from Senator Hughes for this bold package, the *"First Step Plan,"* which he rightfully describes as "a down payment on a constitutional education funding system."

- These funding mechanisms are ones we have prioritized—ones that we have outlined in our legislative platform.
- Let me just draw attention to two specific items outlined in Senator Hughes' plan:
 - First, the restoration of the charter school line item, which has been missing since the Corbett administration and would provide hundreds of millions of dollars towards a more just funding system.
 - And second, designated funding for facilities, which is outlined in both Senator Hughes' plan as well as in the legislation put forth by Senator Kearney and Representative Fiedler.

We know the courts and the constitution— and quite frankly basic human rights— are on our side. **So now is the time, to once and for all, put forth— and enact— a bold investment agenda that truly, truly allows our young people to thrive.** Thank you.