

Senate Education Testimony 5-12-2017

Shane S. Murray, Superintendent of Schools, Iroquois School District

I would like to thank Senator Eichelberger and Senator Laughlin and the rest of this Committee for the opportunity to testify today. Currently, I am the Superintendent of the Iroquois School District, which is known as one of the smallest school districts as measured by geographic size, encompassing an area of 2.3 square miles. Our district's slogan is ***A Small School with Big Pride for Good Reason***. One good reason is that our high school has been named a Bronze Medal School in the America's Best High Schools edition of the U.S. News & World Report for the second consecutive year. Additionally, two weeks ago, a group of our elementary students received the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence. I have included a fact sheet with this testimony that provides you with other details about our district.

As you are aware, from your visit and the testimony today, the Erie School District is in dire straits. Its buildings are in need of repair. Its educational programs are slowly being decimated by yearly cuts. Their current situation has been years in the making, but the innocent students of today are the ones suffering the consequences. Dr. Badams and his team have worked hard to sound the alarm bells and to find reasonable solutions to unprecedented endless challenges. It is obvious that the students of Erie School District deserve better. PFM has confirmed that Erie School District will not be able to save themselves without some assistance from the state. The Erie County superintendents all agree that Erie School District students deserve a high quality education in a safe environment, within their home school district.

Over the last few years, Dr. Badams increased the visibility of Erie School District's plight. The solutions that he and his school board publicly discussed caused many of the Erie County area school districts to have concerns that our own educational programs would be greatly affected if the Erie School District is allowed to fail. One possible solution discussed was that Erie City School District would close down its high schools and send its students to the county schools. Under the current school code, PA School Code 24 16-1607, Erie has the legal right to close its high schools and the surrounding school districts would take on the responsibility of educating their students. Dr. Badams formed a task force made up of local school officials and politicians to talk about this option. However, during our early discussions, it became apparent that this move was not going to solve Erie's problems and would most likely hasten the financial demise of the neighboring districts that would be required to take Erie City high school students. Dr. Badams and Mr. Polito stated more than once that they would not be able to make the required tuition payments to our districts within two years.

As a group, the Erie county superintendents reached out to the Department of Education for technical assistance. Although they acknowledge our concerns, PDE concluded that PA School Code 24 section 16-1607 would allow Erie to close its high schools. Secondly, they stated that the school code gives the parents/guardians of these affected students the ability to choose the closest and most convenient school for their students to attend. Surrounding school districts would not be able turn down any student based on space or educational need. PDE also noted

that it would not be able to provide us any additional financial resources. We asked if PFM could be assigned to study the financial and educational impact this decision would have on our surrounding districts. PDE declined our request and stated that since PFM was already working with Erie and that this situation was likely to end up in court so they could not really take sides.

We came to the following conclusions after meetings with the Erie Public Schools and PDE.

1. Erie could close their schools and the district would not be able to pay tuition to surrounding districts in as little as two years.
2. State law mandates that we must provide an education to all students who claim our district is the closest or most convenient, regardless of space.
3. Enrollments, quality of programs, or the needs of the students are not required to be discussed before a district closes its schools.
4. No additional technical support or proactive research was available from the state for the surrounding districts.

From an Iroquois School District perspective, the decision to close Erie high schools would lead to educational chaos and certain financial ruin, if Erie is able to make this decision unilaterally.

Imagine a high school that currently serves six hundred students being forced to take in more than nine hundred students who speak up to 30 different languages. East High School, which is three miles from Iroquois Jr./Sr. High School would be the closest and most convenient choice for most of these students. Iroquois, which currently has a structural budget deficit of about 1.1 million, would be required to hire more teachers, find temporary classroom space, and hire ELS staff and additional security, without any guarantee that Erie Public Schools could pay the bill for these displaced students. We agree that Erie School District students deserve a quality education, but the financial burden should not be allowed to knock us and other surrounding school districts into financial crisis, like dominoes.

The School Code must be revised to prevent the unilateral decision of a school district like Erie from closing. Additionally, if the school code requires students to attend school until the age of 17, their home district should be responsible for facilitating an educational program to meet this legal requirement.

As you heard today in the testimony given by PEL, the Iroquois School District's financial future is not looking very promising. Our MV/PI Aid Ratio is higher than the City of Erie's Schools, our largest local employer, GE, just laid off half its work force over the last two years and they are demolishing a number of taxable buildings. GE just so happens to make up about 1/5 of the total land in our district, and GE's stability and presence here greatly affect our financial future.

The uncertainty of the current situation is causing many parents in the City of Erie to look elsewhere to live. In 2012, the average house in the Iroquois School District was on the market 153 days before it sold. Currently, the average house in our school district is only on the market 21 days.

This is occurring even though our largest employer has laid off half of its employees, and we have the highest school property tax millage rate in the county. Our enrollment is growing because parents want both quality and consistency in their neighborhood schools. The damage that is occurring to the City of Erie Schools will be long lasting. I strongly urge this committee to find a way to support Erie Schools as it rights its financial ship. In Erie, we often quote the slogan from Oliver Hazard Perry's battle flag by saying ***Don't give up the Ship!*** We in the Erie Area hope that you don't give up on our Schools!

Many more school districts are taking on water in the form of pension cost, cyber charter school cost, and limited local resources. Please realize that without some major changes being made at the legislative level, more districts are going to sink.