



**Testimony for Elizabeth Porth, PhD
Pennsylvania School-Based Health Alliance**

**Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on
Expanding School-Based Health Centers in Pennsylvania
Tuesday April 26, 2022**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Muth, Senator Haywood, members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, friends and guests. My name is Elizabeth Porth. I am honored to have the opportunity to present testimony today to this committee on the critical importance of school-based health centers for children and adolescents who live in poverty. I have been a strong advocate for school-based health centers for nearly 30 years.

Many years ago I served as the Director of Policy and Planning for the Family Resource Network of the School District of Philadelphia. We were responsible for attendance, health, safety and family/community involvement and our primary concern was to ensure that students were in classrooms ready to learn. But, sadly, our students too often lacked access to vaccines mandated for school enrollment and so, many each Fall, were sent home. They were, too often, treated in emergency rooms for asthma and other easily managed illness because they lacked access to routine health care. Obesity and diabetes disproportionately plagued poor children. To keep poor students healthy and in school, I began to advocate for school-based health centers to provide primary care to students where they belong...in school.

That was the mid-nineties when school-based health centers were growing across the country, including in Pennsylvania. In that decade and the next, dozens of studies were done all across the country to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based health centers in improving health outcomes for poor children, and, as a result, improving academic outcomes. The research was strong, still is strong. We saw school districts like New York City truly turn around student outcomes because of improved and enhanced health care for the students.

Thirty years later I am saddened that our data in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania doesn't look much better than it did decades ago.

Children who live in poverty need more than the traditional model of health care. For those of us with more means, we can't truly know what it is to live in poverty, why many children are behind in their routine health care, why their asthma hasn't been brought under control so they miss less school, why they face food insecurity yet struggle with obesity. But we know that school-based health centers successfully address all of these issues so it is time for us to deploy the strategy like so many other states have done for decades.



As a long-time proponent for school-based health centers, today I am proud to serve as Board President of the Pennsylvania School-Based Health Alliance. I am proud that we have 33 school-based health centers improving outcomes across the state. There should be many more. We envision a day when there is a school-based health center in every Title One school in the Commonwealth. But without some additional support beyond Medicaid and CHIP reimbursement, achieving that goal will continue to be limited. The Alliance is proposing a one-time investment in the existing school-based health centers mental health screening services, an area that is perhaps the number one greatest concern facing our youth today. The request also will invest in the School-Based Health Center Data Hub that many other states used to quantify and qualify the utilization of services and the impact.

The Pennsylvania legislature would be wise to make this investment at this critical time when our families are steeped in the trauma of the pandemic of these past two years. I am thrilled and optimistic that the Senate Democratic leadership has called this hearing.

I thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and reflections and for considering this critical investment in child and adolescent health and education in the next fiscal and school year.

Thank you.