



**La Salle Academy**  
PHILADELPHIA

**Testimony for  
Sister Jeanne McGowan, President of LaSalle Academy**

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

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on behalf of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee on Expanding School-Based Health Centers. I strongly support expanding school-based health centers. My name is Sister Jeanne McGowan, President of LaSalle Academy in Philadelphia.

LaSalle Academy is a school located in North Philadelphia educating students in grades 3 - eight, all of whom are living below the poverty level. Our school opened in 2003 to serve this specific population with a unique mission and model. La Salle Academy is owned by a Board of Trustees and run in the tradition of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and Sisters of Saint Joseph. We are mission-driven which means we exist for parents and guardians of children who desire but cannot afford a Catholic Education. Additionally, tuition is only \$250 per year and the Board of Trustees and Development staff raise the operating budget. We are a school for the poorest of the poor in a city that is struggling to address child poverty.

Our mission is to educate our students so that they can find their real potential. Children living in poverty struggle with According to the Pew Foundation, Twenty-six percent (26%) of Philadelphians, between 377,000 and 413,000 people, live below the federal poverty level, including 37% (126,000) of our children. Families and children living below the poverty line struggle with so many obstacles. They face hunger, illness, insecurity, instability, and they also are more likely to experience low academic achievement, obesity, behavioral problems and social and emotional development difficulties (Malhomes)

We have had a school-based health center for seven (7) years now and cannot imagine our school without one. We educate 115 students in grades three through eight. Their families are the poor and working poor. Some are English language learners. They come from the low-income neighborhoods around our school in North Philadelphia. We know that children cannot learn well if they are not healthy; and we know, that for our families who live in poverty, there are structural issues jeopardizing our students' health. Additionally, access issues sometimes make it difficult for our students to get all of the health care they need to be in school every day ready to learn. Eighteen percent (18%) of our students have asthma; one has diabetes.

Since we partnered with Education Plus Health in 2015 to launch a school-based health center, we have seen absenteeism go down, especially for our asthmatic students. We no longer struggle to get an extra asthma inhaler onsite for the school year. For our diabetic student, we no longer worry that we will be able to meet all of her needs at school. Each year about 20% of our middle school students screened by our nurse practitioner present some mental health symptoms, especially after the Pandemic Shutdown. We know that our health center team will work to coordinate the care they need. Each year about 32% of our students screen in the obese percentile. The nutrition and healthy lifestyle education that our nurse practitioner and community health worker provide to our students and parents is a critical part of the foundation we are laying for our students and families. The work that our community health worker Hannah Warshawsky does with our parents to address the social needs of our families is vital, particularly through this pandemic. Referrals for food, housing and employment assistance, and public benefits has been a true lifeline.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly difficult for us as educators and for our students that we educate. It has been difficult for our families as well. We were one of few schools in Philadelphia to reopen in September of 2020. Although the Catholic Schools reopened, La Salle Academy opened with a confidence that our counterparts did not have. We had the support of our school-based health center with a Nurse Practitioner we knew and trusted, with COVID testing and assistance refining our safety protocols. Then in January 2021 when the supplies for assurance testing became available, our school-based



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health center immediately launched that initiative. Their services have been vital through this pandemic and have enabled our school to remain open. For our working families who depend on us for after school education and care, this was critical.

As the founder and president of La Salle Academy in Philadelphia, a school serving 100% of students in poverty, I cannot stress enough how valuable a school-based health center is. Our students are in their seat and ready to learn. Our families are connected to the city and state services that they desperately need. Students and families are learning better nutrition and everyday life skills. Our teachers and staff members were able to educate knowing that they were in a safe and healthy environment. I fervently hope that more low-income students and families have access to this resource across the state of Pennsylvania, for the future of our economy and society.

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