



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA CITY COUNCIL

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COUNCILMEMBER AT-LARGE

Good morning Senator Wagner and Williams.

Thank you for extending me the invitation to submit this testimony. I welcome you to an important conversation about the future of our city and the hard work Philadelphians have done in order to rebuild our public schools, invest in pre-K and our children, and care for the public institutions in every community - all issues which, from my vantage point as a mother of three children and longtime advocate, deserve far more attention in Harrisburg.

As you know, last spring City Council voted overwhelmingly in favor of expanded pre-K, an investment in our public schools, and in a massive infrastructure overhaul of our public parks, recreation centers and libraries. Prior to that vote and since, I and my colleagues on City Council have spent more than 18 months on studies, hearings, debates and negotiations, to ensure these programs work in the best interest of all Philadelphians. In June, our first cohort of 2000 preschoolers celebrated their first move-up day. Additionally, City Council finalized a challenging MOU that brings a pipeline into the building trades, and seeks to better enforce and regulate diversity representation on public construction sites - all major advances. This is a jobs program, an education program, an infrastructure program and an economic program that form the largest anti-poverty initiative this city has seen in decades.

In June I expressed considerable disappointment that the planned hearing in Council chambers so poorly represented the breadth of people whose voices drove the decision of the elected leadership of our city. I expressed these concerns specifically to Senator Williams in an appeal to testify at the hearing, and to encourage him to broaden the hearing to include others. These voices include:

- The hundreds of parents, mothers and fathers - who breathed a little easier because their children were in a quality educational program; and,
- The parents whose incomes increased because they not only didn't have to pay for child care, they could go back to work or school; and,

- Pre-K operators in neighborhoods who expanded and upgraded their facilities as more children came into their programs; and,
- Community leaders and recreation center directors who spoke of desperately needed upgrades to recreation centers; and,
- Principals of the 11 new community schools who have benefitted from expanded programming and supports after years of neglect under a state-controlled school district.

Where are those voices? I would also like to hear from the voice of soda distributors who have aggressively refused to pay the city's distributor tax and instead pass along the tax to keep their enormous profit margins, while driving a multimillion dollar campaign of misleading the public into thinking this is a sales tax.

As the nation's poorest large city, we do not take taxation lightly, and I do not take taxation lightly. I am deeply sympathetic to small business operators. That's why I fully supported Councilmember Reynolds Brown's bill for a healthy beverages tax credit to incentivize the sales of non-sugary drinks, and why many of our members continue to do roundtables and sessions with small business operators, why we routinely exclude small businesses from other regulations we hold to be essential in our city, and more.

But as you and your peers so frequently remind us, local municipalities need to look out for ourselves. This tax came within the context of a state that has not put enough dollars into its public schools, it has not mandated kindergarten or pre-K (despite clear evidence of their efficacy), and it has not adequately supported infrastructure needs (beyond highways and bridges) of the municipalities it serves.

More than a year after the sugary sweetened beverage tax passes, after two court rulings upholding the tax, amid the failure to pass a viable revenue package in Harrisburg and a constitutional amendment to potentially allow municipalities to vacate property taxes entirely – not to mention the current gubernatorial bids of assorted individuals, including that of Sen. Wagner – I am disappointed in this sudden effort to try and grind this city's anti-poverty initiative to a halt.

As Chair of City Council's Committee on Children and Youth, I remain an unabashed advocate and relentless champion for our city's youth and young people. I oppose any effort to curb a lauded and much-researched investment in our young people, especially when their voices are not clearly represented at the table.

I ask the legislature to take caution around pre-emption – especially when dealing with local matters and municipal needs. We have seen a wave of pre-emption efforts across the country that have pushed into affairs long held within a municipality's control and responsibility.

A true partnership with Harrisburg would focus less on pre-emption and the alarming levels of state authoritarianism, and more on the need for a fair and equitable school funding formula that is itself fully funded rather than limited to less than 3% of the state education budget.

A true partnership with Harrisburg would be a collaboration on a real infrastructure pitch to Washington that is less about tax incentives for corporations and instead focuses on getting jobs to repair our transit system, our 70-year old public school buildings, and bring modern greenways to the Delaware River and throughout our city.

In the absence of that partnership, we as a city supported a mayor and City Council who built a broad and diverse coalition committed to listening to the people in our neighborhoods.

We increased local spending on schools by 100s of millions of dollars, amounting now to over 40% of the share of the District's budget. It is a tax burden that strains our own efforts.

These are the efforts that I and many of the city's child and education advocates would welcome you to support. I look forward to that conversation.

Dated: October 17, 2017

Helen Gym
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