

Draft Testimony to the House Committee on Education and Workforce

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**I. Introduction of myself and Allegany County and ACPS**

Good morning, Chairmen Rokita and Guthrie and Ranking Members Polis and Davis. Thank you for the invitation to be here today to share the deep impacts of a very real struggle affecting our district's students and our community. My name is Dr. David Cox, and I am the Superintendent of Schools in Allegany County, Maryland, which is about 2 and a half hours Northwest of Washington, DC. It has been my honor to serve as Superintendent since 2009, now in my 9<sup>th</sup> year in that role.

At one time, Cumberland was the second largest city in Maryland, second only to Baltimore, and at our largest in 1971, we had a student enrollment of about 19,000 students. Today, our enrollment is about 8,700 students. The decline in enrollment is largely attributed to the departure of large manufacturing companies such as Kelly Springfield Tires, AFG Glass, Bayliner, and many more large scale manufacturers.

According to the US Census Bureau, the median income in Allegany County is just over \$40,000 per year, and in 2016 the population was estimated to be about 72, 000, which is down from about 75,000 in 2010. Our county is about 425 square miles and is nestled in the Appalachian Mountains. From Cumberland on the Potomac River traveling west to Frostburg, in just about 12 miles, the elevation climbs about 1200 feet, creating another climate zone.

With the shuttering of so many manufacturers, we have also had to close and consolidate many schools over the years. Likewise, the real estate market has a surplus of available housing, and there is an abundant supply of affordable housing on the rental market.

Cumberland and Allegany County is primarily accessed via Interstate 68, from the east, connecting to Interstate 70, west of Hagerstown, Maryland, and we are about an hour east of Morgantown, West Virginia, on Interstate 68.

Today, our Free and Reduced meal population is about 55% countywide, with schools in the City of Cumberland having over 90%. Our Special Education population is about 16% of our total enrollment.

**II. Summary of the Opioid Crisis in Allegany County and impacts to our students and their families, and our school communities**

Cumberland and Allegany County is testament to the fact that the devastation of the opioid crisis is not contained in America's large cities. It also devastates suburban and rural America.

According to Allegany County Sheriff, Craig Robertson, so far this year there have been 27 overdose deaths in our county.

Today, I wanted to tell you how impactful this crisis is to my children who attend Allegany County Public Schools. As I indicated earlier, I have been the superintendent since 2009, but have seen a dramatic change within the past 5 years, with each successive year getting progressively worse. Among the first impacts we noticed was that our usually strong elementary attendance began to decline. When I talked with our principals about this a few years ago, they told me that they attributed much of the decline in attendance to parents not getting up and getting their kids to school because of drug use, and how difficult it was to make contact with parents to talk about attendance, achievement, and grades. Also, we have seen a progressive decline in attendance at parent-teacher conferences at the elementary level.

We work hard to provide every child in our county with a high quality pre-school experience in our district. This remains a top priority of our local board of education, and we have two Maryland Judy Centers (pre-school initiative named after Maryland Congressman Stenny Hoyer's late wife). We collaborate with our Special Education Department to identify the special learning needs of our children as early as possible through our Infants and Toddlers program. In doing this work, I can tell you that we have experienced a sharp increase in the number and percentage of our children who require special services due to the opioid crisis. Our local health department shared that this year 18% of all newborns in Allegany County are born drug affected, and this statistic does not include those children who may have been exposed to alcohol during their pre-natal development. That is one in 5 of all children born here.

Last school year, we experienced several occasions where parents overdosed and died in their homes while their young children were present. On two different occasions, staff from our County's Head Start Program made home visits only to encounter a young child who answered the door. Each of those times when asked "Where is your mommy?" the child responded, "She is asleep", and when further investigated, the mothers were deceased. In both cases, the cause of their death was overdose.

On another sad occasion last school year, we had a Kindergarten student who came to school on a Monday morning after staying with her father over the weekend. When she got to school, she was sick and had a fever. The School nurse tried to contact the mother, since the custody schedule indicated that the mother was the Monday care giver. When the mother did not answer her phone, the school's secondary emergency contact was a grandfather and he was reached to come to pick up the little girl to take her for medical attention.

Unbeknownst to anyone else that day, the little girl's mother and her boyfriend had overdosed in the mother's home, at which time the boyfriend's 5 year old son, who attended another elementary school, was also in the home. When the boy ran out of food that he could readily eat, he went to neighbors' houses and knocked on doors to ask for food, and this led to the investigation and the discovery that the little girl's mother and her boyfriend were dead from an overdose of Fentanyl. It was estimated by the authorities that the mother and boyfriend had been dead for about 2 days. If the little girl had not been sick at school on Monday, or if the boyfriend's son had not sought food from neighbors, the little 5 year old girl would have gone to her mother's home on the bus and would have encountered the dead bodies of her mother and the mother's boyfriend.

Imagine, if you will, the long term impacts of these two innocent children who have become victims of this crisis.

Also last year, a Kindergarten student was attempting to ride his tiny bicycle to school on a busy street in Cumberland after having missed his bus. A Good Samaritan woman stopped her vehicle and took him and his bicycle to his school just before he would have crossed 4 lanes of traffic on Industrial Boulevard in Cumberland. The mother of this child had not overdosed, but was drug affected to the point that the child could not awaken her to take him to school after he missed the bus. When the school finally did get to speak with the mother, she was unaware as to where her child was.

I, or many of my superintendent colleagues, could provide more accounts of similar instances, but I think this provides you with an idea of how devastating this crisis is to too many of my children in Allegany County Public Schools. Imagine the long term mental health implications of these situations, and also imagine insufficient resources to deal with the mental health needs of my children and their families.

My elementary principals have reported to me that they are experiencing more children who have severe behavioral issues as they enter school. We have, in fact, some pre-school and Kindergarten students who require full time adult support just to manage their behavioral issues as they work on individual behavior plans; and much of the time, there is limited parental support.

The good news is that for many of our children, their public school is the place that they are the most loved, best cared for, where they receive the best nutrition, and are the warmest. Just like the little boy who was trying to ride his bike to school with all the dangers of traffic unknown to him, he knew that his school was a place where he would be taken care of. His principal described him as a “rounder,” but also as a sweet child who had many, many needs. I am proud of his principal, his teachers, and his school for being a safe place for him, but I know that he has many more needs that go beyond the resources available.

### **III. Community/State and State Efforts Underway to Educate Citizens**

Our county sheriff has hosted a series of town hall meetings for the community for the past 2 years and is beginning a new series this week. Our county partners have collaborated in many efforts to educate the larger community. A partial list of the community efforts include:

- The Greater Cumberland Committee Education Subgroup
- The Opioid and Heroin Prevention Taskforce
- The Opioid and Heroin Fatality Review Board
- The Drug and Alcohol Abuse Council
- The Western Maryland Health System Opioid Summit and its policy subcommittee

Allegany County Public Schools has revised its Health Curriculum to include specific information for students for substance abuse at all grade levels, but is particularly focused at the high school level on prevention of the use of opioids. We have two recovering opioid addicts who give presentations to students in high school health classes, as a part of their curricular experience.

Maryland has been a leader on this issue through the General Assembly and the Maryland Department of Education (MSDE). This year, MSDE has developed and shared the “Heroin and Opioid Awareness and Prevention Toolkit” as a resource guide for schools. As well the General Assembly, during the 2017 session passed the Heroin and Opioid Education and Community Action Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1060).

All schools have stock of Naloxone (Narcan) and staff members who can administer the opioid antidote to persons who are believed to have overdosed.

Our Lieutenant Governor, Boyd Rutherford, asked to meet with all of Maryland's 24 Superintendents earlier this year to discuss this epidemic. He attended a meeting of the Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland (PSSAM) and listened attentively to the concerns of Maryland Superintendents representing the nearly one million public school students in the state, and he also discussed Governor Hogan's commitment to work on this issue, and to provide additional funding to local school districts.

#### **IV. Challenges that are yet unmet with effective solutions**

As indicated earlier in my testimony, this crisis has challenged our public schools and has stretched our staff and financial resources well beyond anyone's expectations. I do appreciate that President Trump has recently recognized this as a national crisis, just as has Governor Hogan. It is my hope and plea that our Federal Government will allow flexibility of the use of Federal Funds to allow local school districts to utilize resources to help with our efforts to combat this crisis and attend to the many unmet needs of our children. There is a good opportunity that Title IV funds in the new ESSA regulations could provide some additional flexibility to school districts.

I have great difficulty in finding the words to describe the magnitude of the unmet mental health needs of my students and families. The opioid crisis is connected to this issue on the front end, in that many are self-medicating their depression and anxiety, and many come from families with histories of addiction issues. Children are left with mental health scars when they lose parents to overdose deaths, and quite simply, there aren't enough resources to provide all the needs for counseling, therapy, and treatment. Keeping options for Children's Health Insurance Programs is a critical need.

We also need help to quell the supply of illegal drugs including opioids into this country, and particularly Fentanyl. There are yet too many physicians who over prescribe opioids, and in my inquiries, I have not been able to understand who holds those accountable who are sworn to "first cause no harm," when some physicians knowingly keep those addicted in supply of prescribed opioids.

#### **V. Expression of Appreciation for the opportunity to share**

I want to express my most sincere appreciation for this opportunity to share this information and perspective to this committee. Thank you for the work you do for all of America's Public School children each and every day. My kids count on you, just like they count on me. If there is anything that I can do or that AASA can do to provide additional perspectives or information, please contact us.