Chairman Boyer, Vice-Chair Shope, members of the committee,

Before beginning, I want to take a moment to respectfully & purposefully offer an acknowledgment that the geographical landscape of Maricopa County sits on the ancestral homelands of those Indigenous Nations that have inhabited this land for centuries, including the Pima, Lehi, and Laveen peoples. With humble intent, I also extend this acknowledgment to the lands of the 22 sovereign tribal nations of Arizona.

The past two years have been the most challenging and disruptive years in the history of our education system. It has been challenging for parents and families, for educators and administrators, for school board leaders, and most of all for students.

As I spent time with my newborn daughter at home this winter, I had time to think about our public schools and the staff and teachers who have gone to incredible lengths to keep our schools running as we enter the third year of this pandemic. I also thought about where my daughter would one day go to school and what the future of public education looks like in our state.

I originally planned to give a different speech today. But because of legislative inaction, our districts are facing a school closure ticking timebomb – and it is too important to focus on anything else today but the dire budget cuts facing our district schools. We all agree that we must do everything possible to keep our schools open.

But the biggest threat of widespread school closures comes not from the virus, but a school finance relic from 1980, the aggregate expenditure limit.

In twenty-two days, public district schools in every county will face enormous and devastating budget cuts if you fail to diffuse the ticking timebomb that will force them to close.

Without the immediate passage of Senator Marsh's SCR 1022, or Representative Pawlik’s HCR 2012, district schools will be forced to cut 16% from their budgets – *legally unable* to spend over a billion dollars that you have already allocated to them.

Unfortunately, neither of these bills have been assigned to a committee or received a hearing.

For educators and school staff across the state, a 16% reduction in budgets will mean layoffs amid the already crisis-level teacher shortage. It will mean furloughed bus drivers who may never return to their jobs if they are let go now. For students and their parents and guardians, these cuts will mean losing access to academic programs, extracurriculars, high-quality teachers, and even school closures.

In short, schools will not be able to maintain their current day-to-day operations without action by this body.

Let me be perfectly clear: inaction is not an option and it’s appalling that this wasn’t the first issue addressed when the session started a month ago. Over the last two years, I’ve stood with Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike who have called for in-person learning because we know schools are where students learn best – *especially* our students with disabilities and high needs.

Yet, the issue of the funding cap has nothing to do with COVID-19, masks, or vaccines. And if schools close because they are not authorized to spend money already sitting in their bank accounts, the blame will lie with you – not our public schools.

In total, school districts will lose a combined 1.154 billion dollars – no district will escape unscathed by these cuts. To help us understand what is at stake with these budget cuts, we’re going to go back to the classroom to focus on two critical areas: math and civics. And I was told I can’t give out any extra credit.

In your district Chairman Boyer, the Washington Elementary School District would lose over 25 million dollars. I’ve had the privilege of visiting this district a couple of times – and I fear that they will lose the programs that make this district unique.

Students who are learning English in Washington Elementary speak nearly 60 different languages, which means the district needs to retain highly qualified English language teachers and support parent engagement efforts in multiple languages. If their budget is cut, families and children will lose out.

And in 2019, Washington Elementary identified over 150 million dollars of needed investments to keep their buildings and systems operating safely and efficiently in the long run. They currently receive just 3.4 million dollars for capital needs from the state.

It’s no secret to educators and students that their schools are underfunded – and it will become even more apparent if these budget cuts are enacted.

In Vice Chairman Shope’s district, I’ve had the pleasure of visiting several schools.

Superior Unified School District, which in my 2019 visit had recently sacrificed their Physical Education programs to pay for preschool, will lose just under half a million dollars.

Farther east, led by the 2021 Elsie Toles Women in Leadership Award recipient, Superintendent Sherry Dorathy, Miami Unified School District will lose nearly 2 million dollars.

Cuts to Miami Unified’s budget could end or hurt programs like their partnership with ASU which brings highly qualified teachers into classrooms virtually, or their Career and Technical Education programs, where students receive skills that prepare them for careers or further education in the culinary arts, agriculture, business and more.

And while losing the programs will take away student opportunities, losing staff will have an even greater economic impact on this small community.

The one district I have yet to visit in Senator Shope’s district is Coolidge Elementary School District, where you served as a board member for many years – thank you for your service.

Unfortunately, these cuts will also impact your school community. I know you have enough experience as a board member to imagine what it would look like to remove 2.9 million dollars from the budget in the remaining weeks of the school year.

In Senator Barto’s district, the over 32,000 students in the Deer Valley Unified School District are at risk of losing incredible programs, schools, and teachers due to this looming 36.3 million dollar cut. Teachers like the 2019 Arizona English Language Teacher of the Year Eileen Nguyen will be affected. I had the honor of meeting Ms. Nguyen when she was presented this award in front of all her students at Esperanza Elementary School. And Ms. Nguyen still works for Deer Valley at this same school. She is currently finishing her 28th year teaching in our state. What does it say to Ms. Nguyen’s students if you cut their school budget in the last quarter of the year?

Senator Gonzales, districts in your current district like Flowing Wells and Tucson Unified could lose a combined 63.9 million dollars in funding – resulting in cut programs or even school closures. As we know, Tucson Unified serves 47,000 students and is one of the largest districts in the state. The education of all those students is at risk.

Senator Marsh, thank you for being a public-school teacher in the Scottsdale Unified School District. At the beginning of this school year, I had the pleasure of welcoming all Scottsdale Unified teachers and staff back to school.

Nearly 3,000 employees, including some who have worked at their sites for decades, were present – ready to celebrate a new, exciting school year. Now this district, which has served students and families in Phoenix, Paradise Valley, Fountain Hills, Tempe, and Scottsdale for more than 123 years is facing 23 million dollars in needless cuts.

While Arizona is a leader in providing parents options when it comes to the education of their children - the solution is not as simple as “school choice.” While these cuts only impact district schools, our public charter schools won’t be able to absorb the students that might lose access to their primary district school if these cuts go through – and as we know, in many communities the district is the only choice available.

Furthermore, Governor Ducey is sitting on *not one* but two failed voucher programs that only distributed a small portion of their allocated federal relief funds for private or alternative schooling – an indicator that most parents *aren’t* all that interested in moving their child from their public school.

In Senator Hatathlie’s district, Round Valley Unified District has served both Springerville and Eagar for over 50 years, caring for the education and development of over 1,000 students and their families. This district is set to lose $1.6 million dollars if you fail to act.

Budget cuts of this magnitude translate to layoffs, gutted programs, and closed schools. And while some in the Valley may point to public charters or private schools as a solution, the reality in rural Arizona is much different.

There are no other public-school options in either Eagar or Springerville – neither in neighboring St. Johns nor Vernon. However, the districts that serve both St. Johns and Vernon are set to lose a combined 1.6 million dollars.

For these communities in Senator Hatathlie’s district, the next closest public charter school may be hours away – which can translate to hundreds of miles, *if* families even have the ability and capacity to drop their students off hours away in places like Show Low.

*But even* Show Low’s school district will be forced to operate while losing millions of dollars.

If Round Valley Unified School District is forced to close *even a portion* of their classrooms, those students and their families will have no other public-school choice. And it would reflect an immense failure on the part of the Arizona legislature – too caught up playing political games in Phoenix to prevent closed classrooms and layoffs in rural districts.

It is hard to overstate how profound the impact of these cuts will be to the educational landscape of rural Arizona – and how they will impact the economic outlook of communities like Springerville and Eager where districts serve as major employers.

But the impact in urban communities will not go unnoticed either.

Majority Leader Gray represents multiple school districts, including my former school in the Peoria Unified School District. They serve more than 36,000 students in 34 elementary schools, seven high schools and one non-traditional high school. And they will lose just over 43 million dollars – roughly 2,000 dollars less per student.

When I taught at the district right before my election to State Superintendent, my students in special education were surrounded by dedicated, passionate professionals who made the best out of situations where more funding would have helped.

For example, the life skills program taught many students in special education how to do basic day-to-day. However, when students who were learning English began to exceed the capacity of our school – our district didn’t turn them away citing lack of funds to build more buildings.

They simply got creative – making room for both the life skills and English language learner programs to continue. These services – both incredibly needed – were continued to support student academics.

However, they did this with budget stability – a knowledge that they could pay for each of these programs even if they couldn’t afford a new classroom.

It’s not possible to be “more creative” with administrative and operational expenses when facing a nearly fifty-million-dollar budget reduction – and I shudder to think what losses my former students will face if these cuts are enacted.

And finally, Senator Pace – I promise I didn’t forget about you.

Your current legislative district has the distinction of being home to the biggest public district in Arizona, Mesa Public Schools. Over 64,500 students attend one of the six comprehensive high schools, nine junior high schools, 50 elementary schools and 17 choice and success schools in this district.

Their schools, teachers and students are recognized frequently for their outstanding work in education, including:

* the 2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools designation from the US Department of Education for Franklin East Elementary School;
* 2020’s Arizona School Counselors Association Counselor of the Year Jaime Clemens of Edison Elementary School and;
* 2019’s U.S. Presidential Scholar in Career & Technical Education, Adrian Kwiatkowski (Kwiat/kowski) of Red Mountain High

Mesa will lose 73.8 million dollars if March 1st comes and goes without lawmakers suspending the cap.

These are unprecedented cuts, worse than those made during the great recession – and they will have a devastating effect on the many Arizona students and families that are served by district schools. Families that do not have time for political games or brinksmanship on this issue.

And nor do our students, who are smart enough to know a bad deal when they see one.

And while we disagree on whether education funding is currently adequate, you have increased education funding year after year. But this year, your inaction will undo those efforts and harm the students who represent the bright future of our state.

Our students can do math -- whether or not they are wearing masks. And they are tired of the Legislature playing games with their future, which is exactly what will happen if these cuts go through.

And if these cuts happen, our students will lose opportunities – to learn a new skill, to follow a career path, to be taught by a high-quality educator.

Students like Felicity Ramirez who lives in Kearny (Kern-y), attends the Ray Unified School District, and is represented by Senator Shope.

Last year, Felicity wrote to me advocating for better pay for teachers. She said:

*“Teachers are with us for about 90% of our life [as students]. They help guide us in our future goals and career paths, beginning with us learning our ABCs and counting to ten. They play a huge role in our lives, and they always want what’s best for us as students. I feel it is right to fight for them and what they deserve because they would do the same for us. Considering the pressure on teachers, I feel they deserve higher pay. Teachers go into education with high hopes of making a difference. But instead of thanks, they get a barely livable wage. As a student, I feel our educators deserve better.”*

Students like Felicity will take these cuts for what they are: the continued underfunding and undermining of their education.

So, despite all the other important issues related to education, this issue must be addressed above everything else: suspend the Aggregate Expenditure Limit, let districts keep the money you have already allocated to them and allow them to get on with the critical business of educating students during the third year of this pandemic.

After it has been suspended, I also urge you to pass Representative Pawlik’s bill HB 2335 repealing the expenditure limit. It is a relic of the 1980s when public charters did not exist and when Arizona’s total population was smaller than that of Phoenix today. And it unfairly holds districts to different standards and will continue to hamper their ability to serve their students and families.

Like I said earlier, there was going to be a lot of math and civics in my speech this year – which is timely as both seem to be subjects near and dear to the hearts of lawmakers this session.

But whether or not you’re ready to grasp the concepts covered today, the unfortunate reality remains:

Despite what Governor Ducey said and what you might think, you don’t have much time to garner a two thirds consensus. You have a handful of working days to prevent students and families from waking up to the consequences of political indifference – and failing to act will harm students and families.

The money is already in district bank accounts, you are not adding new money or raising taxes – just letting them spend all the money you budgeted to them last year.

There is no other choice but to suspend and repeal the cap.

Can I count on you to vote for a clean fix to keep our schools open before February 28th?

Boyer: hypotheicsl what a putzh. 301 been excluded,) prop 208 has nothing to do with it, were putting stress on families.

Legislature set the budget for this year. If they don’t act, we will have school closures.

Are you saying the schools can afford to lose a billion

The reason that we are where we are is because we put so much $$$ in education. Boyer. sShoulkd we override the voters (from 1980)

Thank you for investments. To cut a billion dollars would be devastating.

Gray: we should have mba running schools. I would organize around that budget. They have.

Hoffman: the district knew what their budget was but they didn’t count on the suspension of the cap so they could use all the money that was given to them.

Gray: I don’t understand the reasoning. There should have been more consideration of the cap.

Hoffman: enrollment and not thinking this would be a problem.

Marsh: we gave the schools this money to spend. The voters also have us the ability to override this with 2/3 vote. W*e gave the schools the money. W*e are the only ones that can allow them to spend it.

Gonzales: It’s going to be devasting. We can fix this with a 2/3 vote.