

EDUCATION

# Educators, students rally for more public education money

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**UPPER DARBY »** Sixty-four years to the day Rosa Parks ignited a civil rights fight for integrated public transportation, the decades-long right to for prosperous schools throughout the country continues to plague more diverse school districts, and Upper Darby persists for its fair share.

Upper Darby School District officials, students and community members Thursday afternoon called for more financial help from the state to provide the adequate resources and learning spaces to educate 12,500 students in 14 school buildings. The diverse district of 1,000 English language learners, 2,000 students with special education services, more than half of all students being economically disadvantaged, and classrooms that can be packed with over 30 students each are just some of the realities that the district is dealt with day-to-day and year-to-year to attempt an equally beneficial learning environment to neighboring districts that are more advantageous.

With an annual state funding shortfall of about \$16 million, according to district leaders, Upper Darby is making due with the deft hand afforded to it by the state.

“While we certainly are not provided the financial support the state and federal government have promised, we are rich. Despite the very clear attack on public schools, we excel. We have students attending some of the best colleges in the country, and we have students eager and ready to take on the world, and I mean the world,” said Superintendent Dan McGarry.



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Upper Darby Schools Superintendent Dan McGarry, center, addresses the public on the \$16 million shortfall from the state to educate his 12,500 students. Joining him are assistant superintendents John Council, left, and Ed Marshaleck, right.

“The lack of funding for school districts like ours continues to put pressure on our teachers, administrators, school boards, our taxpayers, and in all reality, our students. We are united, however, in our belief that public education should be the number one priority on a national and state level.”

Like all school districts, various state and federally mandates are to be met (college and career readiness, English language standards, special education, retirement contributions, charter school tuition, etc.) that usually come with no financial bump from the respective government to help implement them. Over the summer Gov. Tom Wolf signed a school security bill that requires all school police officers, school resource officers and school security guards to attend school safety training at \$495 per person. For a 40-member Upper Darby school security guard force, that’s an almost \$20,000 cost the state did not appropriate

with the law.

That figure is more than the \$14,000 per pupil spending the district commits to educating students.

On top of that, a \$100 million plan to build a new middle school and expand an elementary schools to ease overcrowding will most likely not be reimbursed through PlanCon, a state capital improvement program that pays back some construction money back to a school district. PlanCon has been on indefinite moratorium since 2016.

In a state where the government funds about one-third of public education costs, local real estate taxes supplement about two-thirds of the remainder (federal funds are but a small percentage of budget revenues). Nearing the bottom of the list for state contributions to the public education system, even Upper Darby High School students are aware of what that means for the local tax base.

“Many of the resident in these communities are peo-

ple of color, immigrants, and people in borderline poverty. Raising the local taxes doesn’t relieve much of the stress,” said Tnaveer Kaur, secretary of the Class of 2023. “Urban schools are expected to do better without many of the same resources as their suburban counterparts. The quality of our education should not rely on our zip codes, we are the collective future of this country and you’re holding many kids back from reaching their full potential due to the lack of funding.”

“We call on you all to help us get the funding we truly deserve in order to ensure that Upper Darby kids can get the best education they possibly can and to make us all proud.”

Kaur’s classmate Daanish Rehman said a school district needs the right tools for the job. He compared the demolition of a wall by what one would rather have for the task: A sledgehammer or a fork. Rehman didn’t have to embellish more in his metaphor about the district being “forked” over to perform the universal job of educating children.

“There is not one person who would rather waste away their potential and settle for what they have now. The only barrier, once again, is funding,” he said. “Everyone still got by nonetheless, and even if we don’t receive help, we will keep getting through. It’s just another obstacle, right? Living in 19082 (Upper Darby) or 19026 (Drexel Hill), it should help us, seeing as we have dozens of countries and about 70 languages all coming together for the same purpose.”

A district’s zip code has been a recurring theme in



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Upper Darby freshman Daanish Rehman talks about the vast amount of clubs and groups at the high school, but how more money could expand all of those learning opportunities and more.

the statewide campaign for better funding, implying that certain areas of the state with more persons of color, economic disadvantage or overall need dictates how much money a district will (not) receive.

To counter some inequality, Wolf has adopted a fair funding formula that adds any new money to the state’s education budget line items since 2014-15 is apportioned through that formula (\$700 million of over \$6.5 billion through 2019). The formula apportions this new money through demographic factors like poverty and the number of English language learning.

Upper Darby is surrounded by districts with varying levels of socioeconomic status. Still, an affluent, mostly white school district like Wallingford-Swarthmore has the county’s highest school real estate taxes at 47.2083 mills while the mostly black, more impoverished William Penn School District has a real estate tax millage rate at 47.100. Wallingford-Swarthmore excels while William Penn goes to state appellate court in a lawsuit against the state about how funding inequities has harmed it.

McGarry said the inequal-

ity of funding pits districts against each other.

“Right here in Upper Darby we are often unjustly compared to some of our other local county school districts who are providing an education that is often times tens of thousands of dollars more per pupil than what we provide. I find the comparison divisive and often times insulting to not only our school district but to the other school districts in our county,” he said. “The constant focus on how much one school district can provide its students pit us against one another.”

“While our school district is without question underfunded by over \$16 million every year, we continue to show those who doubt us that we are nothing short of excellent. We are not here to cry about our lack of funding, however, we are here to celebrate who we are and what we accomplish despite the clear and specific attack of public schools in communities such as ours.”

Upper Darby was one of 17 districts Thursday to make a uniform speech for funding reform for urban school districts, including nearby Norristown Area and Pottstown school districts.