

EDUCATION

Report: Schools need \$4B+ more in state funding

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Pennsylvania's public schools were underfunded by about \$4.6 billion in the 2018-19 school year, according to a new report authored as part of an ongoing lawsuit alleging the state has failed its obligation to ensure that every student receives the basic resources they need to be college and career ready by the time they graduate high school.

The suit, captioned William Penn School District et al. v. the Pennsylvania Department of Education et al., was originally filed in 2014 against the governor and legislative leaders by the Public Interest Law Center and the Education Law Center on behalf of six school districts, seven parents, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS) and the NAACP Pennsylvania State Conference.

The Commonwealth Court initially dismissed the case, which was later reversed by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. After dispensing with several objections, the suit is now in the summary judgment phase and Judge Renee Cohn Jubelirer has set a Dec. 7 date for all briefs to be filed.

Penn State University Assistant Professor of Education Dr. Matthew Kelly is presented as an expert witness in that case and his 110-page report outlines just how imbalanced the petitioners say education funding has become in Pennsylvania.

Widening gaps

"Pennsylvania's school finance system is unequal and inadequate," the report flatly concludes. "If we use



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Penn Wood High School in Lansdowne. The William Penn School District, serving the boroughs of Aldan, Colwyn, Darby, East Lansdowne, Lansdowne and Yeadon, has a shortfall of more than \$4,800 per pupil and would require an additional \$28 million, according to the report.

the state's own measures and definitions to quantify the amount needed to correct the inequality and inadequacy of funding in the state, the commonwealth needs billions of dollars to close the basic education funding and special education funding equity shortfalls, as well as provide its share of the adequacy shortfall confronting districts."

Kelly found that 86% of students attend school districts that are not adequately funded under Pennsylvania state law enacted in 2008 and that a little more than half of the state's 500 districts need more than \$2,000 more per student. The districts with the largest per-pupil gap are found in urban, suburban and rural districts alike, according to the report.

Upper Darby School District sits atop the list for Delaware County with a shortfall of nearly \$6,000 per student, according to

the report. It would take more than \$77.8 million in additional annual funding to close that gap, by Kelly's figures. William Penn, serving the boroughs of Aldan, Colwyn, Darby, East Lansdowne, Lansdowne and Yeadon, has a shortfall of more than \$4,800 per pupil and would require an additional \$28 million.

"Pennsylvania spends an average of \$4,800 less per pupil on students in poor districts than on students in rich districts, and this gap continues to widen," Kelly found. "The revenue gap between the poorest and richest districts has grown by \$1,000 per student since 2008-09. This gap has grown even though property tax rates for the poorest districts have increased more than in the richest districts."

These disparities have very real-world impacts on academic outcomes, according to the report. Stu-

dents attending wealthier districts that spend more on education generally have higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates, Kelly found, and children living in poverty who go to well-funded schools are significantly more likely to attend and graduate from college than students in less wealthy districts.

"You take a low-income kid, you put them in a low-resource district - the impact that the resources that have been brought to bear have on that child's future is profound," said Dan Urevick-Ackelsberg, an attorney with the Public Interest Law Center. "If you're a low-income kid in an underfunded district versus you're a low-income kid in a well-funded district, you're going to have two very different potential outcomes. The kid in the well-resourced school district gets the resources



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"Upper Darby is over 60 percent low income," said Upper Darby Superintendent Dan McGarry. "We're 10 percent English learning, 17 percent special education and close to 60 percent Black and Latino. What does that tell you? It sends the message that equity and access doesn't matter. They deserve the same opportunities as everybody else in the public education system, to compete on that playing field, and unfortunately that's not a reality. That's not happening."

he or she needs to live up their potential."

There are several contributing factors to these widening gaps, according to the report. While basic education funding has declined \$470 million between 2008 and 2018 in terms of "real dollars," the report says, charter costs to districts have more than doubled during that same period and now stand at more than \$2 billion.

Special education funding has also declined by 12% as the number of special education students in the state has continued to increase, and pension costs continue to climb.

"It comes down to what we've been talking about for a long time here in Upper Darby, with access and equity to education and resources for our students," said Superintendent Dr. Daniel McGarry. "Give us the additional \$5,000 per student and hold us to that, and we'll show what can happen when those resources are in play in a school district like Upper

Darby. I would venture to say it's remarkable what our teachers and our buildings do right now with student achievement and student growth with such limited resources. I can't imagine how wonderful it would be here if we had less stress and more supports in place for our kids and our families."

Local Burden

With inadequate state funding, the petitioners argue that districts must turn more and more to local sources, resulting in a situation where Pennsylvania's poorest districts pay the highest school tax rates. William Penn is the highest-taxed district in the county at 34.6 mills and one of the highest in the state.

"About 35 percent of all education spending, education funding in Pennsylvania comes from the commonwealth itself and the vast majority of the rest of it comes from local taxpayers," said Urevick-Ackelsberg. "We rank 46th in the

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country for the share of education funding that comes from the state versus local taxpayers.”

He said that has forced many districts in the state to cut services or positions as they struggle to make ends meet, putting an ever-increasing burden on local taxpayers while continuing to spend less on education per pupil.

Many of the districts identified in Kelly’s report as needing the most help are the ones educating the classically disadvantaged, with half of the state’s Black students and 40% of Latinx students attending the lowest quintile wealth districts.

“Upper Darby is over 60 percent low income,” said McGarry. “We’re 10 percent English learning, 17 percent special education and close to 60 percent Black and Latino. What does that tell you? It sends the message that equity and access doesn’t matter. They deserve the same opportunities as everybody else in the public education system, to compete on that playing field, and unfortunately that’s not a reality. That’s not happening. We’re asked to do every single year more with less and now you add a pandemic to it and now it’s only going to be more substantial.”

Former WPSD Superintendent Jane Ann Harbert said that when she came on as a consultant in the district about 12 years ago, each building had at least one reading specialist, a reading coach and a math coach.

But budget cuts beginning in 2009 sharply reduced those numbers, along with summer programs, after-school programs and counselors. One elementary school did not have a principal at all, she said.

“We tried to make cuts that didn’t impact students



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Dr. Eric Becoats, superintendent of the William Penn School District, said the district currently has two social workers trying to serve 5,000 students spread across 11 sites.

immediately in the classroom, but all of those cuts impacted all students, regardless of where they were made,” she said.

Dr. Eric Becoats, who replaced Harbert in February following her retirement, said the district currently has two social workers trying to serve 5,000 students spread across 11 sites.

“We are not able to address some of the needs of those students when they’re in the buildings and we’re seeing in some instances that some of those students are having some greater needs now that we’re in a remote and virtual type of setting,” said Becoats.

While the district was able to secure funds through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to provide students with Chromebooks and internet services, Becoats said the pandemic brought into stark relief other issues with resources.

“We have not been able to, because of funding, update our curriculum as it relates to math, or science or social studies,” he said. “So we can talk about being in a virtual setting. Those current resources are not applicable, if you will, for a virtual reality. We’re still having to deal with a lot of paper and pencil with those resources, because they don’t have necessarily the ability to transfer to a



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The Upper Darby School District sits atop the list for Delaware County with a shortfall of nearly \$6,000 per student, according to the new report. It would take more than \$77.8 million in additional annual funding to close that gap.

virtual setting or you’re not able to access the curriculum through technology.”

Then there are the aging facilities themselves. Becoats said that if the district was to bring students back in, it would have to do so in a tiered setting because the rooms are simply too small to adequately social distance.

Even before COVID turned the world upside-down, Harbert said class sizes in the district were too large. She said William Penn conducted a study during her tenure and found that it would need 13 more teachers just for grades kindergarten through third grade to get class sizes down from 30 or 32 kids per classroom to a more manageable 25. For grades four through six, she said, the district would need another 25 teachers.

But, she added, even if the district was able to fund all of those salaries, it still wouldn’t have anywhere to put them.

“If we’re sticking kids in a class of 34, 35 kids in a class, that is already a disadvantage,” said McGarry. “If you’re sticking all kids in poverty in a similar setting with limited resources, it’s harder to build some of those prerequisite skills. And that’s part of the ad-

versity that kids are facing when they get there. ...We’re asked to compete in the same ways without the same resources. It just doesn’t make any sense to do that, year in and year out.”

McGarry said that an education stimulus package enacted under Gov. Ed Rendell did have a tremendous impact for students in his district, with 96% of all subgroups in assessment tests showing growth.

“And all of a sudden when that money went away, when it was taken from our school district, you saw a substantial decline in educational opportunity and the key resources that were lost, initially, were reading supports,” he said. “Our elementary school and middle school reading programs were cut. Close to 30 teachers were cut at that time and we’ve never recovered and been able to hire those teachers back.”

McGarry said there are several elements that go into educational equity, including infrastructure, exposing kids to back-ground knowledge with things like field trips, having appropriate types and levels of staff, and keeping up with technology and curriculum.

“Those factors all go into

a well-rounded education and many of these school districts have to reduce and cut all of those programs,” he said. “They don’t improve their facilities because they can’t afford them. They limited the types of field trips and background knowledge kids can go to because they can’t afford them. They can’t hire the reading specialist. They can’t hire the social worker. They can’t hire the guidance counselors. They can’t get the new curriculum in place and they can’t get the new technology, and the gap continues to widen.”

Fundamental Issues

Harbert said the state wants districts to make sure kids are proficient and advanced in a wide variety of subjects, but many of those coming in to William Penn are disadvantaged from the start.

Many of the students don’t come to kindergarten with any preschool experience, she said, and those that do are typically coming from more of a child-care setting than an educational one. With large class sizes and limited one-on-one educational time, many students quickly fall behind in reading and struggle to ever regain their footing,

according to Harbert.

“I have a reading background, so I know how critical it is for our children to learn how to read in kindergarten and first grade,” she said. “Reading is a true science, it is not an art. You need to learn how to teach reading.”

Parents might read to their children, she said, but that doesn’t necessarily translate to best teaching practices. And when kids are in the classroom, teachers can identify who is struggling and put them in small groups or have special education teachers get involved.

But if the district has jam-packed classrooms and no resources other than a single teacher, many children get left behind. Even before COVID, Harbert said only about half of students were reading at grade level in kindergarten and first grade, figures that are only likely to get worse as the pandemic wears on.

“So you have a student who is not reading at grade level, most likely is not performing at grade level on mathematics either, because a lot of math is still reading, and so the problem just continues,” said Becoats. “We will be faced with more challenges, more students who have these challenges in upper grades, so it’s just a domino effect as time goes on.”

Typically, if an eighth-grade student was only able to read at a third- or fourth-grade level, Becoats said, the district would bring in additional resources like a specialist to help accelerate them and get them on par with their peers.

“So then you end up with more students who may be identified as needing special education services, but that’s even more expensive because their needs are greater,” he said. “You want to try to make the class for that child much smaller or do one-on-one pull-out work. If you don’t

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