

# Underfunded districts educate over half of Pennsylvania students and the vast majority of Black and Hispanic students

The Bethlehem Gadfly Education July 23, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on Education* 

*from Karen Beck Pooley, “Your View: Pa. school funding far from fair.” Morning Call, July 22, 2020.*

On June 21, a Your View appeared in The Morning Call written by Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera in which he noted “Our education system is not without fault in perpetuating the systemic inequities and institutional bias that many of our communities have accepted as normal. Education is an institution rife with historic inequities in resourcing, inequities in discipline, and inequities in opportunity. These structures must be dismantled.”

He discussed important work underway: equipping schools to prevent or address racist incidents, training teachers and administrators to recognize inherent biases, recruiting more nonwhite teachers. But he made clear that much remains to be done to dismantle black and Hispanic students’ barriers to opportunity. And he tasked all of us with pressing “our elected officials to equitably resource our schools.”

Here’s how far we are from equitably resourced schools:

Pennsylvania currently ranks 47th (out of all 50 states) in terms of its share of public schools funding. . . . According to data from the education-focused Research for Action, several districts in our area receive even less of their budgets from the state: roughly 30% in Easton and Whitehall-Coplay, roughly 25% in Bethlehem, East Penn and Nazareth, and roughly 20% in Parkland, Salisbury and Saucon Valley.

This pushes more of the burden for funding public schools onto local communities, which, in Pennsylvania, cover 62% of the cost. And this means that disparities between communities become disparities between schools.

Given these dismal disparities, it is shocking that the resources the commonwealth distributes to local school districts are still not allocated in an equitable way despite careful study by the bipartisan Basic Education Funding Commission and the passage of its recommended Fair Funding Formula into law in 2016. The formula works like this: It considers several “student-based factors” (such as how many children are enrolled in a district and what portion are in poverty or are English Language Learners) as well as several “school district-based factors” (such as low densities in rural districts that might increase costs, as well as how districts’ local taxing effort and local taxing capacity (the market value of local real estate and residents’ combined personal income) compare to state averages). Taken together, these factors were meant to determine what portion of state funding each district should receive.

Standing in the way of allocating money to districts according to the Fair formula, though, is “hold harmless,” or Pennsylvania’s practice of ensuring that school districts receive no fewer state dollars in one year than they did the prior year.

The commission acknowledged these “changes in enrollment ... bring additional funding challenges” for growing districts, forcing many to “absorb increasing educational expenditures with local revenue” as their state allocations fail to keep up. But the Basic Education Funding Commission and state Legislature ultimately showed a greater concern for those districts with declining enrollments, currently receiving more basic education funding than the fair funding formula suggests. Redistributing resources, the commission argued in its final report, “would have a significant negative impact on many school districts” and so proposed only distributing “new money” using the fair funding formula.

This “new money,” or the increase in basic education funding since 2016, accounts for just a fraction (roughly 10%) of all basic education dollars.

So while “hold harmless” sounds benign, it glosses over the fact that many districts are “held harmed.” These underfunded districts educate over half of Pennsylvania students and the vast majority of Black (78%) and Hispanic (82%) students. Most Black (51%) and Hispanic (52%) students are in districts that are underfunded by at least \$10 million annually.

As Secretary Rivera stressed, “we need to use this moment, this outrage, this commitment to move forward.” Multiple bills that could be a start are currently sitting with both the Senate and House Education Committees: House Bill 961 would implement fair funding in full immediately; Senate Bill 362 and House Bill 1313 would do so over the next four years. It is long past time legislators focused on those “held harmed” by our methods for funding public schools in Pennsylvania.

*Gadfly doesn't cover education matters as much as he should — and appreciates the calling of this article to his attention.*