

Pennsylvania school districts face catastrophic funding crisis

Douglas Lyons
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A recent report detailing the financial conditions of Pennsylvania school districts describes a frightfully precarious situation for students and teachers as they enter the 2016-2017 school year.

Across the state, financially distressed school districts are axing staff and educational programs and increasing class sizes in an effort to offset education cuts—enacted by former Republican Governor Tom Corbett and continued by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf—that have taken a damaging toll throughout the state.

The report, titled *Continued Cuts: Losing Confidence, Losing Learning*, was issued by the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials. It surveyed 355 school districts that educate about 1.2 million students. PASA and PASBO have been issuing a yearly report since 2010-2011 when the funding crisis became more acute and began affecting opportunities for children.

This year's survey emphasizes that overall well-being for school districts is the worst of any survey thus far and that “no one imagined that the cuts would continue six years later,” i.e., through the Democratic Wolf administration. The survey projects that 46 percent of school districts will cut staff, including teachers, administrators and custodians, 34 percent will increase class sizes, and 50 percent will terminate some educational programs.

The expenses for school districts continue to rise yearly, but funding has declined. According to the survey, mandated increases in spending are driven by rising pension contributions required by previous inadequate funding, skyrocketing health care costs and special education programs, while funding is diverted to charter schools.

An example from the report, Corry Area School District, located in the rural northwestern part of the state,

has a profusion of kids coming from poor and working class families, over 70 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. Twenty-two positions have been terminated over the past three years, forcing some elementary schools to have a ratio of 500 children to one principal.

Brenda Clabbatz, business manager, said that increases in special education and cyber-charter tuition have precipitated the budget cuts. Corry Area pays more than double for kids who attend a non-district cyber charter, but the quality of the education is subpar. Superintendent Bill Nichols said, “There’s no question we see significant differences in kids who attend our own cyber or blended learning programs versus kids who attend the for-profit cyber schools.” Many of these cyber-charter students return to Corry but have fallen behind their peers. “It’s as if we’re paying for them twice, once to attend a cyber and again to remediate when they rejoin our schools,” he stated.

The state government, for its part, has drastically cut education funding since the recession, and it has not reached the levels before the cuts had taken place. Corbett, the previous governor, massively undermined education by cutting it by about \$850 million or \$410 per student. The most recent budget passed, 2015-2016, still underfunds classroom spending by \$200 million, not counting for inflation.

The current 2016-2017 budget, still being negotiated, will not properly fund school districts. Wolf had initially proposed an increase in \$350 million but has recently stated in an interview with Pittsburgh radio station KDKA, “We need a balanced budget that is truly balanced. I want \$250 million for basic education, an increase. ... And I think all this can be done without a broad-based tax increase.” As the “budget battle” ensues, the starting point for his increase will only further erode.

The report notes that the financial situation is so critical

that, even with additional funding, school districts would have to lay off teachers and reduce the quality of the schools, noting: “[U]nder Governor Wolf’s proposal to add \$250 million in basic and special education revenues to next year’s state budget, the vast majority of districts report they could not restore the cuts they have been forced to make since 2010.” The responders said that, even with fully restored funding, 62 percent of school districts would not restore a single position from the layoffs, while only 1 percent said they would restore all those positions.

Pennsylvania’s funding ratio has been notorious for its inequities, through which richer schools districts receive more money compared to working class school districts. A bill was recently passed, proposed by the Basic Education Funding Commission, to correct these discrepancies, but it is at best a token gesture for schools.

According to the *Continued Cuts* report: “[W]hile administrators agree this is an important step towards a more equitable system of school funding, many are quick to point out that a funding formula is only as good as its revenues. Even under generous projections, less than six percent of state funding would be distributed through the formula in 2016-2017.”

SE Delco School District, near Philadelphia, has a large and growing immigrant population and a high poverty rate, while being adjacent to some of the wealthiest schools in the state. Dr. Stephen Butz, Superintendent, said, “We don’t have any indoor swimming pools. We are lacking in the basics in terms of the number of teachers we have and the courses we can offer. Most of our technology is six to eight years old. We want to be held to the same standard as our neighbors, but the resources we have are so different.”

The incessant attacks on public education have produced a catastrophe for teachers and students that will continue indefinitely. Earlier this month Erie School District issued a statement saying it plans on closing all its high schools, ending public education after the 8th grade.



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