

Getting to Full and Fair Funding for Pennsylvania Schools

In 2016, lawmakers took an important first step in addressing the existing funding disparities among school districts by adopting a fair funding formula based on the recommendations of the bipartisan Basic Education Funding Commission (BEFC).⁶ The student-driven formula directs new state funds to local school districts based on objective factors including enrollment, poverty, number of English Language Learners and charter school attendance. It also addresses district size, sparsity, wealth and local tax effort – factors that reflect student and community needs unique to rural school districts.

But the state, while increasing state funding for K-12 education in the last three budgets, has yet to fully fund the new formula to the point that it ensures adequate funding for all school districts.



Student performance in rural districts and others will continue to decline without adequate state funding to support qualified teachers, up-to-date textbooks, small class sizes, and other supports that help students achieve.

To compel the state to take action, PARSS joined parents, school districts and other education organizations filed a lawsuit to challenge the state's unwillingness to adequately fund public education and provide students with the resources they need to succeed academically. In that case, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court recently ordered the Commonwealth Court to hold a trial on whether state officials are violating the state's constitution by failing to adequately and equitably fund public education. The Supreme Court ruled that the courts had a clear duty to consider whether the state legislature was complying with the Education Clause of the Pennsylvania Constitution, which requires the General Assembly to "provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education." The decision also paved the way for the courts to consider whether the state's inequitable funding system discriminates against thousands of Pennsylvania children based on where they live.

The court can demand that Gov. Tom Wolf and the General Assembly make changes to ensure the state's education system is "thorough and efficient." Or our lawmakers can decide not to wait for a directive but take action first by appropriating significant and sustained funding increases through the new fair funding formula so that all students have the resources needed to succeed, no matter where they live.

1 PA Department of Education, 2016-17 Enrollments, <http://www.education.pa.gov/Data-and-Statistics/Pages/Enrollment%20Reports%20and%20Projections.aspx#tab-1>
2 U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 Annual Survey of School System Finances (2017)
3 Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Spending Impact on Student Achievement: A Rural Perspective (March 2017). <http://www.papartnerships.org/work/k12/k12-reports>
4 PA Department of Education, Annual Financial Reports 2015-16 (2017)
5 PA Partnerships for Children (2017)
6 Basic Education Funding Commission Report (2015), http://www.pahouse.com/Files/Documents/Appropriations/series/2879/ED_BEFC_Final_Report_061815.pdf

November 2017

Preparing Rural Students for Success: Full and Fair Education Funding for All



Rural schools are a vital part of the state's educational system. More Pennsylvania students are educated in rural schools than in the state's largest urban school districts of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Allentown, Reading, Bethlehem, Hazleton, Scranton and Erie combined.¹

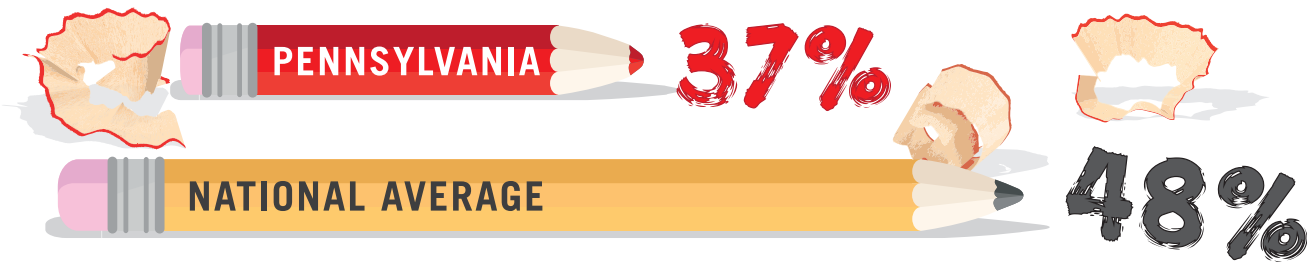
While Potter or Greene counties may seem a world away Philadelphia, schools in these and other rural areas have much in common with city schools. Many are grappling with the effects of a broken state education funding system, struggling for enough resources to maintain reasonable class sizes, keep buildings in proper repair, protect core academic and extracurricular programs from elimination, and providing students with books and technology that are not out of date.

Pennsylvania's Flawed State Education Funding System

In Pennsylvania, the costs of public schools are primarily paid for by the state government and local school districts. But the state is not paying its fair share.



Pennsylvania pays for just 37% of public school costs, ranking it 47th in the country. Only Nebraska, South Dakota, and New Hampshire cover a smaller share. Nationally, the average state share is 48%.²



That means that school districts pay more in Pennsylvania than most anywhere else, about 56% of what is spent to educate students. This puts more pressure on school districts to generate revenues through local property taxes.

This low state share, combined with years of distributing state dollars without a formula for fairly allocating those state dollars based on student and school district needs, has left most rural school districts inadequately funded. For many rural school districts limited in their ability to raise enough local revenues because of lower property values and tax bases, it is difficult if not impossible to invest in the programs and services that wealthier districts can afford: reasonable class sizes; up-to-date textbooks, computer technology, and lab equipment; rich academic offerings including advanced placement, music, art, science and technology courses; tutoring for students who need extra help; and support from school counselors and librarians.

Rural schools, like their urban counterparts, educate many children living in poverty. Many serve economically challenged communities that have been buffeted by opioid epidemic and other social issues. They educate students spread across large, sparsely populated areas that present higher transportation costs and that limit the ability to save money through economies of scale.

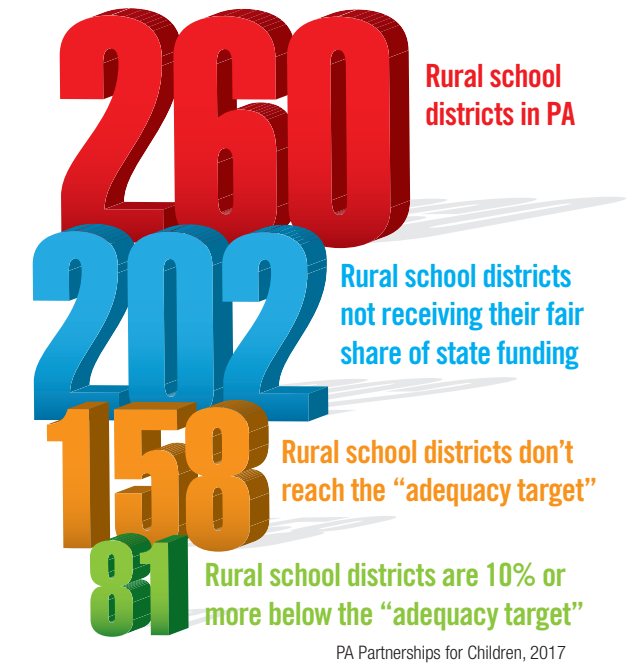


The Impact of Inadequate and Inequitable State Funding on Rural Students

The state's longstanding failure to fully and fairly fund its schools is harming rural students. A recent report by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children³ shows that student achievement is at risk when rural school districts spend below the amount needed to properly educate students.

The study examined spending and achievement at the 260 rural school districts in Pennsylvania, finding:

- 202 rural districts are not receiving their fair share of state funding, forcing them to either spend less and risk student achievement (i.e., below their adequacy target) or increase local taxes
- In turn, 158 rural districts spend below the amount needed to properly educate students – or the “adequacy target.”
- When rural school districts do not reach that adequacy target, the underspending is a direct result of inadequate state support.



Among the starkest examples of funding disparity is the comparison of per student spending for actual instruction in some rural districts compared to the districts in wealthy communities.

For example, in western Pennsylvania, per student spending in Blair County’s Claysburg-Kimmel School District is \$6,585.90, less than half the spending at Quaker Valley School District in Allegheny County, which is \$13,703.97. In the east, per student spending at Mount Carmel School District in Northumberland County, \$6,581.64, is dwarfed by the spending at Lower Merion School District outside Philadelphia, which reaches \$17,408.80 per student.⁴ The primary reason for these differences: wealthy communities can pay for their schools through local property taxes in a way many rural communities cannot.

That lack of support negatively affects student achievement. Of those 158 rural districts that are spending below their adequacy target, 81 are doing so by 10 percent or more; their students are performing worse on the English Language Arts (ELA) PSSA and 8th grade Mathematics PSSA than the rural average.⁵

Test scores are not the only measure of student achievement, but community members and state policymakers should be concerned with these results.

All public school students must meet the same academic standards. Therefore, all schools need enough funding to help students meet those standards and be successful after graduation.

Rural school officials do their best despite these difficult fiscal circumstances to support qualified teachers and provide up-to-date textbooks, small class sizes and other supports that help students achieve. In the best of circumstances, classrooms are equipped with tools that can enhance learning to help them compete in today’s technology-driven society.