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In our words

Remedying the school funding gap would help to fix the school achievement gap

THE LNP EDITORIAL BOARD 3 hrs ago

Kathleen Wiercinski, principal at George Washington Elementary School, greets a student arriving for school on Sept. 20, 2018. An overwhelming percentage of students at the Lancaster city school are in or near poverty.

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THE ISSUE

Last week, the state Department of Education released the results of the latest standardized tests — the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and the Keystone exams. Among the top performers were Hempfield, Lampeter-Strasburg, Manheim Township, Penn Manor and Cocalico. Manheim Township alone had three of the highest-performing schools: Neff, Nitrauer and Reidenbaugh elementary schools. As LNP’s Alex Geli reported, Columbia Borough School District was one of the three lowest performing in Lancaster County; the other two: School District of Lancaster and La Academia Partnership Charter School.

Once again, standardized test scores confirm a tough reality.

“A significant gap still exists between Lancaster County’s high- and low-performing schools,” as Geli wrote. “One noticeable difference between the two groups: poverty.”

He noted: “School districts like Hempfield, Lampeter-Strasburg and Manheim Township have historically performed well. Meanwhile, Columbia Borough, La Academia Partnership Charter School and School District of Lancaster — schools with far higher rates of economically disadvantaged students — consistently fall below average.”

This surprises no one, least of all the educators who teach our county’s poorest children. They know that too many of their students came to kindergarten already behind their middle-class peers. Their students have fewer resources at home: fewer books, fewer visits to museums, fewer vocabulary-enriching trips and, in the most heartrending instances, fewer of the basic necessities such as nutritious food and safe housing. These are students whose parents or guardians cannot afford time off from work to attend school meetings, let alone private tutors.

We’re going to continue to see the same results until the disparity in school funding is fixed.

And the crazy thing is, we already have the tool to fix it. It’s just being used too sparingly.

In 2016, the state Legislature passed a school funding formula that was the product of exhaustive work by a bipartisan commission (yes, there’s been such a thing in our polarized state Capitol). The formula wisely accounts for factors such as poverty, enrollment and a district’s tax base.

But in their infinite wisdom, lawmakers decided that only new state funding each year would be disseminated through the funding formula. The reason? The “hold harmless” provision in state educational funding law.

That eye-glazing bit of legalese essentially means that schools, once granted a certain share of funding, must continue receiving at least that share. Even if their enrollments decline. Even if their needs can be met by a thriving tax base. Even if the needs of other schools far outpace theirs.

It makes no sense.

As Geli reported in July, Lancaster County schools received a 2.5% boost in basic education funding this year from the state.

Statewide, basic education funding increased 2.6%, or \$160 million, to \$6.7 billion.

But less than \$700 million of that \$6.7 billion is flowing through the fair funding formula. Which means some of our schools are seriously underfunded.

One such district is Conestoga Valley. Superintendent Dave Zuilkoski told LNP his district has consistently been in the bottom 1% of adequately funded districts in the state.

If all money was distributed through the fair funding formula, Zuilkoski said, Conestoga Valley would receive an additional \$9 million annually.

Such chronic underfunding harms students. And taxpayers — because when school districts need to meet the ever-increasing costs of educating students in poverty, or students with disabilities, school boards are forced to raise property taxes. And the brunt of the burden falls on the shoulders of senior citizens who can least afford property tax hikes.

We came reluctantly to the conclusion that the fair funding formula must be fully implemented sooner rather than later. We favored an incremental approach at first because we were concerned about the school districts that would see their state funding levels decline. But we became convinced that failing to fully implement the fair funding formula only perpetuates an ongoing injustice, giving short shrift to schools serving high percentages of low-income students.

Legislation that would remedy the inequity — House Bill 961 — languishes in the House Education Committee.

Lawmakers seem content to allow class after class of Pennsylvania students to attend schools that lack the resources to meet their needs.

Every year, these students sharpen their No. 2 pencils and sit for the PSSAs and Keystones. And every year, the results come in, confirming what we already know: that poor schools performed poorly, and wealthier schools excelled.

It's not just poverty the poorly performing schools are up against: It's also a poverty of imagination among lawmakers, who fail to envision what a little political courage could do to help all of the commonwealth's students strive — and succeed — on a level field.

The great Thaddeus Stevens had little patience for those who, as he put it, are “willing to educate their own children, but not their neighbor's children.”

In an April 1835 speech that saved the Pennsylvania Free Schools Act of 1834 from repeal, Stevens called for “the blessing of education” to be “carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of your mountains so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freemen.”

Pennsylvania's poorest children are not just in our mountains, but in our cities and, increasingly, in suburban school districts like Conestoga Valley. We should be funding their schools fairly, using the tool — the fair funding formula — that's already close at hand.

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