



**Testimony to House Education Committee  
Wednesday, May 30, 2007  
Submitted by Janis Risch, Executive Director, Good Schools Pennsylvania**

Thank you Chairman Roebuck and members of the committee. I appreciate having the opportunity to present comments regarding the 2007-08 state education budget.

Good Schools Pennsylvania is a statewide advocacy organization committed to bringing about the day when all children are assured access to a high quality public education. There are many signs that this is not currently the case:

In too many parts of our Commonwealth students who are struggling to learn and have few other resources go to schools lacking in the most basic of supplies – the textbook. In Tuscarora, a superintendent reports that he had to scavenge text books from the dumpsters of a nearby wealthier district. In York, the newspaper reports that students struggling to learn math are thwarted by not being able to take textbooks home. In Daniel Boone, a journalist and parent remarks that her son doesn't have a textbook to take home -- only the AP class enjoys that privilege.

Over and over again, we hear about textbooks that are so old, the content stops at the current Cold War. These textbooks are dog-eared, spine-broken and marked up. Because there are not enough of them to be distributed to every student, a frequent practice in under-resourced school districts is for teachers to load the textbooks on a cart and scurry with them from one class to another. In a really hard hit school, the cart may even be broken as well. Resourceful teachers try to compensate by making hand-outs, only to be stymied when the school's budget for copying paper or toner has run out in January. Many spend hundreds of dollars of their own money to supplement the supplies.

The neglect goes beyond the textbooks. There are schools where libraries lack novels, encyclopedias, dictionaries and thesauruses....schools where students do not enjoy the support of librarians or adequate numbers of school nurses, counselors, and advisors. There are schools with broken and unreplaced athletic equipment, and broken and unreplaced musical instruments. But there are also entire schools lacking music or art teachers, or any college prep courses.

In too many of our schools, students try to concentrate while spending the better part of their day in buildings where bathrooms that lack soap, paper towels, toilet paper, where broken toilet seats and locks go unreplaced....schools where, because of decimated budgets, janitorial services are minimal and it is not uncommon to see bugs and mice....where ordinary maintenance is so routinely deferred that students try to learn, and teachers try to teach, in buildings that are cold in winter, unbearably hot and humid in late spring....where rainy days mean that wastepaper baskets will be called into double duty service catching water from leaky roofs....where classrooms and libraries lack acoustic tiles, and the interchange of teaching and learning is compromised by exposed noisy pipes.

The children that face the greatest hurdles in preparing themselves for career or college are most likely to be taught by the most inexperienced teachers, but who could possibly be prepared to teach in overcrowded classes with inadequate supplies except a miracle worker. In fact there are many miracle workers in our schools, but a student's education shouldn't depend on miracle workers, any more than it should depend on their zip code.

The individuals and organizations in our network --- including parents, students, teachers, administrators, faith communities, business leaders, and community organizations are working to improve schools on many levels. They are working to improve their schools at the classroom level, the school level, even the school district level. But they also recognize that all their efforts may help them win the battle but lose the war unless there is greater support from Harrisburg, where in fact, the responsibility for public education begins in our Constitution.

Just as I described the many indicators that our schools are not uniformly providing a quality education to all students, there are several indicators that the state's system of funding public education is seriously flawed:

While Pennsylvania can proudly say that we ambitious statewide academic standards, our funding formula has not kept pace.

Pennsylvania ranks among the bottom nationally when it comes to state share of school costs: in 2004-05, the state share of school costs funded by the state budget amounted to 35.8%. Nationally, the average is closer to 50 % paid by the state.

The amount of state appropriations on a per pupil basis also lags the national average, averaging \$3,475 in Pennsylvania, while the national average for annual state support for students is \$4,253 per student.

Because of insufficient state funding, public education in Pennsylvania is excessively dependent on local wealth, with the result that the quality of educational opportunity for children varies widely.

There is a \$10,259 gap between what the highest and lowest spending school districts in Pennsylvania spend per pupil on current expenditures. The highest spending district spent \$18,064 per student in 2004-2005; the lowest only \$6,991. This translates into a \$276,825 gap per classroom of 25 students.

It is many of the poorest school districts that have the highest tax rates, yet still do not have adequate levels of funding to ensure a high quality education is available to students.

As noted regionalist Myron Orfield said to a recent gathering of concerned citizens in the Southeastern PA suburbs, Pennsylvania's over-reliance on the local property tax is not only harmful to students and harmful to schools; it is the primary culprit for the hollowing out of the cities and inner ring suburbs and uncontrolled growth in the outer-ring suburbs. "You need to organize around a new school funding formula," he said.

The seeds for a new school funding formula were planted last year when the General Assembly took the important step last year of authorizing and funding a costing-out study to determine the basic cost per student needed to prepare all students for success. On behalf of Good Schools Pennsylvania, thank you for that.

A top-quality national consultant was hired by the State Board of Education to conduct the study and is now using several comprehensive and well-recognized methodologies. The results of the study, which are expected in November, should inform the General Assembly in developing a sound school funding formula that addresses the increasingly rigorous expectations for students and teachers.

However, in the meantime, the General Assembly should not miss the opportunity to make progress through the 2007-08 education budget.

**Basic Education Subsidy:** The governor has proposed, and the House has adopted, a \$166 million increase -- nearly 3.5% - in the basic education subsidy. While 3.5% may sound generous, please consider that its positive impact is mostly mitigated by the increase of \$83 million that school districts will collectively have to pay for increased contributions to the School Employees' Retirement System. Further,

our data indicates because state share is so low in Pennsylvania, the effect of past increases of this size have primarily served to prevent further decline in the state's school finance system.

**Special Education:** Similarly, although the proposed increase in special education funding of \$29.4 million – or 3 % -- is generous, it, too, is largely offset by the anticipated \$22 million decrease in federal funding for special education.

**Foundation Supplement:** Within the basic education subsidy are several formulas for driving out the funding, including a foundation supplement. This is the direction where you want to be heading. You want a funding formula that takes into account the actual enrollment of students, and guarantees a minimum funding target that districts should reach in order to provide an adequate education. It's important to note that the foundation funding of the past 2 years only qualifies a school district for a little more state funding from the basic education subsidy; it does not actually guarantee a foundation level of resources to all students.

**Early Childhood Education:** The governor is also recommending other increases, including \$100 million more in the Accountability Block Grant earmarked for pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten. Before 2004, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states making no investment in early childhood education, despite research that makes a compelling case for these investments. Although Pennsylvania has made important progress over the past three years, we remain behind much of the country with our relatively small investment in early education and below average participation in full day kindergarten. The proposed \$100 million earmarked for early childhood education would help Pennsylvania make significant progress in this area.

**Accountability Block Grant:** Except for the \$100 million dedicated for the new pre-K and full-day kindergarten initiatives in the Accountability Block Grant, there is no increase proposed for the current \$250 million level available this year.

Beyond the budget items, the school code is another place where the General Assembly can take steps to advance Pennsylvania's school funding formula. Last year, the costing out study was authorized and funded in the school code. This year, the General Assembly could follow the lead of other states that have been successful in advancing school funding reform through the creation of an independent commission that can serve not only to develop proposals for reform legislation, but also to serve a monitoring and reporting role.

I would like to close by asking you to consider the similarities between the conditions I have described in Pennsylvania's schools and the neglectful conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. As you may recall, the story of Walter Reed officially broke in mid February with articles in the Washington Post describing grisly details: Mold, mouse droppings, dead cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses.

As the Post reported, soldiers, family members, volunteers and caregivers who tried to fix the system said each mishap seemed trivial by itself, but the cumulative effect wore down the spirits of the wounded and stalled their recovery. "It creates resentment and disenfranchisement," said one Walter Reed social worker, quoted in the Post. "These soldiers will withdraw and stay in their rooms. They will actively avoid the very treatment and services that are meant to be helpful."

The truth is that many of the children attending the schools I have described interpret the neglect as signs that they are unworthy, and they, too, struggle with resentment and disenfranchisement.

But the other real question I have about the Walter Reed story is to wonder what it took for the conditions to finally be taken seriously. While the story officially broke in February, the truth is that many people were aware of complaints for at least three years.

Members of congress had heard the complaints, the White House had heard the complaints, and the Defense Department had heard the complaints. But while everyone was informed, they either

downplayed the information, or thought it was one person's complaint, or just did not make it the priority that it has now become, finally shaming the highest levels of government into quick action.

I do not know what it will take for Pennsylvania's schools to finally be seen, for as George Orwell pointed out, "to see what is front of one's nose is a constant struggle." On behalf of Pennsylvania's children, I urge you struggle, constantly, not only to see, but to act.

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