

Building One Pa.: Funding fix for schools is statewide challenge

Evan Brandt- Sunday, July 22, 2010

(Third in a series of reports on the Building One Pennsylvania summit)

LANCASTER — State Rep. Mike Sturla, who represents the city of Lancaster in the state Legislature, also represents more than 900 homeless students who are taught in his city's schools each year.

"There are 16 homeless shelters in my city," Sturla, D-96th Dist., told the more than 600 people packed into an auditorium at the Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology for the Building One Pennsylvania summit meeting held July 16.

"But there are no other homeless shelters anywhere else in the county. Did every one of those people come from my city? Of course not. Many of them came from the towns around Lancaster, but when they became homeless, where else would they go?" Sturla said.

"But when I talk to my colleagues about this, they say 'I'm sorry you have that problem,' even though those people

left their district and came to my district," he said.

"And when parents in their district want to make sure their kids get off safe to school, they stand at the end of their driveway in bunny slippers, next to their Lexus, to make sure their child gets on the school bus safely, a school bus the state helps to pay for," Sturla continued.

"In my city, when a parent wants to make sure their child gets to school safely, they need to form a

special escort group to take kids through drug-infested neighborhoods because the city can't even afford to pay crossing guards," he said.

If any of this sounds like conversations about schools in your town, chances are, you live in a First Suburb.

That's the name given to the crazy-quilt of towns, boroughs and school districts of all stripes that sprang up outside major cities during the last 50 years as city residents flocked into the countryside in pursuit of a suburban American dream.

(First Suburbs is also the name taken by an organization trying to form a coalition of those municipalities and which helped organize the Building One Pennsylvania summit.)

But for many of those towns, that dream is slipping away and they are facing the same kind of urban issues that drove them from the cities in the first place.

For a long time, one of the problems facing Pennsylvania's 501 schools districts (now down to 500) was that in terms of funding, Harrisburg viewed all school districts as being equal, whereas any Realtor can tell you that is hardly the case.

Just ask Jean Dexheimer, an 11-year member of the Wilkesburg School Board, a small Allegheny County borough adjacent to Pittsburgh and which ranks 498th in state standardized test scores.

Wilkesburg "was once the place to be," Dexheimer told the Building One Pennsylvania audience.

"People paid tuition to send their children there, or used a false address to send them there."

Now, more than 50 percent of the district's children

are in single-parent homes and the middle class "which can't afford to leave" is sending their children to charter schools, which cost the district even more money.

The town is caught, she said, in a catch-22.

"We won't raise the property taxes because more people will leave, but we can't revitalize without reforming the schools, and no school reform will work so long as communities like ours are allowed to decline."

Too many schools

One problem with school districts in Pennsylvania is there may simply be too many of them.

Dan Onorato, the Allegheny County Executive and Democratic candidate for governor, told The Mercury in an interview last week that some districts may well have to be shut down.

(His Republican opponent, Attorney General Tom Corbett, was also invited to the summit in Lancaster but did not attend.)

"We have 500 school districts," Onorato told The Mercury. "There's no magical number, but what I do know is 500 is too many. We have several school districts in the Commonwealth who can't make it anymore. They're never going to make it. Their tax base is gone."

Onorato added, "and we have to have a legal mechanism for them to get out of the business, to figure out how we're going to deal with those school districts who are no longer going to function. That's what I'm going to focus on, the ones that can't perform any more, what do we do with them."



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Noting that Gov. Rendell last year proposed reducing the number of school districts from 500 to 100, Onorato said he thought that was the wrong approach and instead would use incentives to try to get school districts to merge voluntarily, something he said he has done successfully with some services in Allegheny County.

"I would definitely try to incentivize it, instead of prop up a system that's never going to get better," he said.

For several months, members of the Pottstown School Board discussed opening merger talks with the Pottsgrove School Board, whose district surrounds Pottstowns on three sides, but the Pottsgrove board expressed no interest.

If Onorato is elected in November, it may be a discussion those boards find themselves having again.

Formulating school funding

Many in these First Suburbs are starting to realize that the problems they thought they left behind in the city have followed them and must be faced head-on in order to build a sustainable and competitive Commonwealth.

And many are starting to realize that there are government policies which perpetuate inequities like Sturla described, and one of the places that is most evident is in education funding. The uneven distribution of schools funding creates what Brookings Institution senior fellow Myron Orfield calls "the tyranny of the Zip code."

Two years ago, the Legislature conducted a "costing out study" which began by looking at successful school districts, examining how they spent their money, and working backward to create a formula in

which it was calculated how much would be needed to achieve similar results in less successful districts and to adjust the district's funding accordingly.

The formula, which goes by the somewhat uninspiring name of the "adequacy target," factors in additional costs, such as number of students in poverty, number of English-language learning students, district size, and geographic price differences, according to the Good Schools Pennsylvania website.

"The state share of funding is then calculated by evaluating each school district's adequacy target vs. actual spending in the funding year, community wealth and tax effort. The result of the funding formula is a more equitable distribution of state resources: School districts with greater resource needs, high tax effort and low local wealth will receive a greater percentage of state funding," the site explained.

The policy also contains an accountability measurement designed to ensure the additional state money is spent on programs, early education in particular, that will bring about the improvement sought.

Special education funding improves

In the past two budget sessions, that formula has taken some beating, but has emerged intact, in part due to an influx of cash in the form of federal stimulus money.

Many district business managers have worried publicly that the 2011-2012 budget year, when that stimulus is gone, could be devastating to education funding.

Nevertheless, some more reform is in the pipeline.

Similar to the costing out study formula, Harrisburg

is now looking at funding special education costs and basing aid more on what a district actually spends, rather than on what Harrisburg believes it spends.

Since 1991, the state has provided special education funding to each district on the unrealistic assumption that each has a 16 percent special education population, true on a state-wide average, but wildly uneven when urban districts are compared to suburban and rural ones.

A bill which Sturla sponsored and passed the House of Representatives overwhelmingly in June, would fund special education based not only on the actual number of special education students in schools, but also consider factors like poverty in the school district.

Locally, only state Rep. Sam Rohrer, R-128th Dist., was among the 25 representatives who voted against it.

The Legislature adjourned for the summer before the bill could be taken up by the Senate, but advocates such as Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, which helped organize the Building One Pennsylvania event, have vowed to push to be sure the Senate considers it in the fall.

To understand how crucial special education is to First Suburbs towns like Pottstown, Norristown and Coatesville, consider that in last year's budget, about 20 percent of the Pottstown district's enrollment of 3,100 students had been identified as special needs children.

In May, Pottstown School District Business Manager Linda Adams joined Spring-Ford Schools Superintendent Marsha Hurda testifying before a panel of Republican House members brought by state Rep. Tom Quigley, who sits on the House Education Committee, to provide input on the proposed law.



Adams told them Pottstown spent \$11.5 million on special education, out of a total budget of \$53 million on special education last year.

Given that for the past several years, the state budget has included none or almost no increase in special education funding, any increase it costs from mandates or for new students needing expensive services comes out of the local taxpayers pockets — taxpayers living in a town with a dwindling tax base and one of the highest tax rates in the state.

Pam Bateson, Pottstown's director of special education, told the panel that Pottstown's special education costs had increased by 15.74 percent since 2006, but that state subsidies had grown by only 10.88 percent.

Pottstown Schools Superintendent Reed Lindley, who attended the July 16 summit, said education can be the key factor in helping people rise out of poverty and on a cost-benefit basis, may be the single best investment of public money there is.

During a First Suburbs forum in Pottstown last month he said he welcomes accountability coming hand in hand with targeted state funding, noting that schools like Pottstown are on the forefront of doing more with less.

Despite receiving a smaller share of the state budget pie, Pottstown's early education program, called PEAK, has emerged as a model program being adopted statewide, including some of those districts whose share of state funding has been higher for decades.

Orfield said even more dramatic changes are needed in how Pennsylvania funds schools.

"Kentucky recently went from 30 percent state funding for education to 80 percent," he told the audience in Lancaster.

Similar reforms have been made in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Minnesota, Montana, Kansas and Nebraska, he said. "Almost everybody has done more than you have," he said of Pennsylvania.

"The rest of the country is moving toward these things, you can too," he said.