

Testimony of Michael Churchill¹
To the U.S. Department of Education Equity and Excellence Commission
Town Hall Meeting, April 29, 2011

Thank you for inviting me to talk with you today. Nothing is more important than dealing with the inequality of governmental resources spent on educating children. Children competing with one another in the same job market do so with starkly different public investments in their success.

In Pennsylvania the disparities in spending in gross terms range from \$8,237 per student in the Dunmore School District to \$21,127 in the Lower Merion School District for all expenditures except financing costs.²

These gross differences mask the level of inequality, because educators know the costs of educating all children are not the same. Students needing special education services, English language learners, and children living in deep poverty need more services and cost more for school districts. Pennsylvania wanted to know therefore what the cost of educating its students to proficiency levels would be for each district, and how these costs compared to the amounts currently available in each district. To answer these questions the legislature in 2006 ordered the commissioning of a Costing Out Study by the State Board of Education which was conducted by the firm of Augenblick, Palaich and Associates and completed in December

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² From Pa Dept. Education Annual Financial Reports, Expenditures 2008-09

2007.³ The Study, however, also conclusively showed the deep inequalities in educational opportunity that existed.

The report⁴ used most of the principles of fairness outlined in the National Report Card discussed by David Sciarra⁵ — in particular it was based on the principle that varying levels of funding are required to provide equal educational opportunities to children with different needs. However, because Pennsylvania had a coherent set of state standards, and was not attempting to measure across standards as the National Report Card had to, the Costing Out Study Report was able to carry the concepts in the National Report Card to another level beyond the model used there. The Study was able to determine actual costs for educating each average student and then the additional cost of children with disabilities, English language learners and children from families in poverty. It then applied these costs to the actual numbers of each type student in each district. In addition to those demographic factors, it accounted for differences in geographical factors, such as regional costs of living, district size, district density, and changes in growth. It did not use a factor for concentration of poverty

³ The Education Policy and Leadership Center, Good Schools Pennsylvania and the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania deserve the credit for getting the Legislature to authorize this study.

⁴ The Report, entitled *Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Public Education Goals*, can be found at the Pennsylvania State Board of Education Web site:

http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/research_reports_and_studies/19722/education_costing-out_study/529133

⁵ <http://www.schoolfundingfairness.org>

because it counted actual numbers of students in poverty and not census figures on poverty in the community. Furthermore, using an average cost for poverty produced substantial increases in funding to districts. To the extent that in the future differing cost figures can be determined based on differing concentrations of poverty, they could be entered into the formula.

The Costing Out Study was really a report on the Cost of an Adequate Education, district by district, and thus did not have to estimate sufficiency of funding or whether the distribution of funds was equitable. Sufficiency was directly measured not by using an estimated norm but with an actual cost calculated by educators for all costs except capital costs and transportation. That cost was then compared with actual expenditures for those services and the excess or gap computed. The methodology is set forth extensively in the report itself.

The results were revealing. Out of 501 districts, only 25 (5%) had no gaps. Five districts had gaps greater than \$5,000 per student (the highest was \$6,437 which was 46 percent of the adequate educational resources found necessary); 29 had gaps greater than \$4,000 per student; 167 had gaps greater than \$3,000 per student, and more than half of the districts had gaps greater than \$2,500 per student. The overall statewide gap was \$4.4 billion which was about 28% more than the existing expenditures.

Although there was not perfect alignment, districts with the smallest gaps between what they spend per pupil and the "adequacy amount" needed for all students to achieve state standards had the most students at grade level. Those with the largest "adequacy gaps" have the largest percentages of students below grade level. Schools with gaps less than \$2,000 per student had 80 percent of their students at state proficiency levels; at schools with gaps between \$2001 and \$4,000 only 73 percent were proficient; and at schools with gaps greater

than \$4000 only 55 percent were proficient. Money pays for a quality curriculum and the books and materials that support it. It pays for high quality teachers and reasonable class sizes. It pays for guidance counselors who help students prepare for their futures by understanding their options and selecting the right courses. It pays for the unique needs of certain groups of students, including those with disabilities, those who are learning English, those who are gifted, and those impacted by poverty. It pays for professional development to improve the skills of current teachers and administrators. It pays for modern educational technology that helps students learn and helps prepare them for college and the 21st century workplace.

Because of the Study, for the first time, Pennsylvanians knew what it would cost to give every child an equal chance to become proficient based on Pennsylvania standards. It showed that 95 percent of the school districts were underfunded and that there were huge disparities in the extent of the funding adequacy. Whatever criticism there might be of the exactitude of the cost model, the bottom line was that all districts were being judged by the same standard and the differences between their resources were dramatic.

As a result in 2008 the legislature committed itself to a phased in plan to increase funding and to distributing new funding based on a formula very similar to that used in the Study. Because of the economic downturn the legislature has been failing to meet those goals, and the current governor is proposing to actually reduce state spending on public schools by \$1.1 billion. An analysis of those cuts shows that they will bear most heavily on poorer school districts.

Why is this Study important? One reason is because it tells us that some solutions to solving problems of so-called failing schools are misguided. The Pennsylvania legislature is

considering a voucher proposal to initially help students leave the 144 persistently failing schools located in 22 school districts on the grounds that we morally need to help students leave failing schools, presumably because that is the only way to get them an adequate education. But an examination of those 22 districts shows all but two historically have been grossly underfunded. To say a public school has failed these children is to identify the wrong perpetrator—it is the legislators who have refused to produce adequate resources for these children’s schools who have failed the students. It is the legislators voting to cut public school budgets rather than raise the necessary revenues who have failed these students, not the teachers and administrators in those schools struggling with inadequate resources. Frankly I am tired of hearing that getting poor and minority children out of failing schools is the new civil rights battle when we have never delivered on the old civil right of equitable distribution of resources so that all actually have a real chance for an adequate public education. That is the civil right that has been too long denied.

It is no mystery why this matters. The Supreme Court in 1954 told us in *Brown*:

“Today education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments....Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.”

A study two years ago by three researchers at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University entitled *The Tax and Transfer Fiscal Impacts of Dropping Out of High School in Philadelphia City and Suburbs*, documented that the changing structure of our

economy with its increased white collar and service jobs and decreasing industrial jobs means increased educational accomplishment is a necessity for employment opportunities which will enable a person to support a family. But the most important reason, lies in what such inequality and denial of opportunity means in the hearts and minds of the young people who have to live it daily. I want to end my time by reading a most remarkable poem I heard Wednesday night, which was written by a Philadelphia student, Jacob Winterstein, in 2004. Its called Insufficient Funds.

Insufficient Funds by Jacob Winterstein (2004)

50 years later

50 years later

50 years later

and this fact can't be debated
our schools are still segregated

now color isn't the only divide
we got the city and suburban side

separated by mere two way streets and imaginary lines
not found by eyes
only on maps
not just used to split districts to be taxed, properties and plots
but to split the haves from the have-nots

50 years later
and who you are and the neighborhood you live in
still determines the education that you're given

if you grow up in the suburbs of philly

\$17,000 a year are spent on your education

if you grow up in philly only \$10,000 are spent

between here and

there

i'm tryin' to figure out where 7,000 dollars went

as I look at the discrepancy and the ground beneath me

that is supposedly the land of equal opportunity

seems to me that equality ain't free

you gotta pay the right fee for a good high school degree!?

50 years later

and we still got these government officials with issues talkin' about

"Well, their schools are funded better because they pay more property taxes. Those kids in the city just need to pull themselves up by the boot straps and get going."

what i'm trying to grasp is

are these classist asses

willing to look a 2nd grader in the face and tell 'em their school is horrible because of some property taxes

of course not, don't know why I ask this

politicians interact with us like vertical lines and y axis

50 years later

over

and we still got qualified teachers in front of crowded classrooms leaving
under

THE KIDS

stuck in the middle

of this sick twisted riddle

that's got me trying to figure out

why if you go to the school in suburbs

you're expected to attend a university you're treated with humility in your school with modern day facilities

but in the city, your school is old and cracked like the bell of liberty

I don't know what teachers expect of me except they want to get rid of me

50 years later

and you can learn more from poetry stages
than you could ever learn from out dated ripped up text book pages
going to schools that feel like prison cages
what's going on inside kids' heads is outrageous
but we don't get counselors to see their faces
instead we get security guards to be the replacements
prisons and schools might as well be adjacent

because my state can't find \$7,000 for a student to do well
but they can find \$35,000 to keep a young person locked in a jail cell

they can't find money for teachers or books
but they can find money for cameras and cops to treat us like crooks

the feds can never find money for teachers to teach me
but they can always find money for ROTC

step one foot inside of school if you don't believe me

50 years later
and we're taken one step
we've changed the word the written the law
if you look at the results we haven't changed at all
we're stopped.
we're stalled, we need us, we need me, we need you, we need all of ya'll
to pick the fight back up

because

50 YEARS LATER
and it's still unjust