



PUBLIC INTEREST LAW CENTER OF PHILADELPHIA

AFFILIATED WITH THE LAWYERS COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS UNDER LAW

Remarks of Michael Churchill, *Of Counsel*
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I feel a little disoriented speaking here in the Capitol Rotunda because on the train here I read the Pennsylvania Constitution which calls on the General Assembly—that is the Governor and the legislature—to “maintain a thorough and efficient system of public education” to serve the needs of the Commonwealth.

And in another part of the Constitution—just to make sure legislators understood the importance of education—it requires that appropriations for schools be in the same bill that appropriates the legislators’ salaries. Now that is important.

A thorough and efficient system means one where all students have access to schools which will prepare them to meet the state standards for an educated citizen; where all are able to read and write and think well enough so they can find a job in our highly competitive global economy; and it means that the quality of your school does not depend on where you live.

Looking at what actually is happening in Pennsylvania, it doesn’t appear that our legislators have read the Constitution recently. Can you call it thorough and efficient when Lower Merion, with less than 10% of its students in poverty, spends \$27,000 per student and Philadelphia, with around 70% of its students in poverty has only \$14,100 to spend per student? Gaps like this exist throughout the Commonwealth. Here in Dauphin County one district spends \$12,600 per student and another \$20,400—this is a gap of \$8,000 or two-thirds more. In Allegheny County the range is from \$12,600 to \$21,7000 or more than \$9,000 per student. And in Delaware County the range is from \$12,700 to \$21,000 or \$8,000.

Can you call a system thorough and efficient when some schools have courses in Chinese, Japanese or Russian to prepare their students, and other districts have to choose whether to have counselors or music, librarians or nurses, art teachers or behavioral support. In Philadelphia they are proposing schools with no music, no art, no athletics, no counselors and no libraries. None. Several of the distressed school districts are considering cuts almost as draconian. The huge different investments of public funds in a child’s future make a real difference in the education they get.

You have heard how the General Assembly cut \$900 billion going to school districts and how in every surrounding state the legislature appropriates more per student aid for public education than in Pennsylvania. Only one conclusion is possible: The General Assembly is not complying with its Constitutional duty.

The State Supreme Court has said that the only persons who can enforce this constitutional mandate on legislators and the Governor are the voters of the state – not the courts. It is up to all of us as voters to ask each legislator what he or she is doing to comply with the oath they have sworn to that Constitution. Tell them to read the Constitution and to act now to make our schools the engine of progress for all that they were intended to be.