

Chapter 3

Taking Action

Because Pennsylvania’s school funding problem has many aspects, there are lots of ways to become involved in fixing it. Here are some suggestions. You don’t need to try to do all of them; where you start, what you do, and whom you work with will depend on your own interests and preferences.

Whatever action you choose, it’s important to remember that help is available. The Education Law Center (www.elc-pa.org), Good Schools Pennsylvania (www.goodschoolspa.org), and the Education Policy and Leadership Center (www.eplc.org) are all working on school funding equity, and can offer information and support. Many other organizations, both local and statewide, are also working on these issues.

The Education Law Center has also published a Toolkit that may help you carry out some of these activities. You can get the Toolkit from ELC or from ELC’s website, www.elc-pa.org.

We’ve divided these action steps into three categories. First, we talk about gathering information about local conditions and needs, and formulating a set of findings and concerns. Second, we discuss how to have a voice on certain funding-related decisions that are made *at the local level*. Third, we talk about how to have an impact on funding-related decisions *at the state level*.

Gathering Information and Formulating Findings and Concerns

- ✓ Gather information about resources – facilities, staff, programs, services – in your local schools and district.

- Use an existing survey or checklist (see p. 3), or make up your own.
 - Talk with students, families, teachers, and administrators.
 - Collect newspaper clippings and media reports dealing with resource issues.
 - If key resources are in short supply or missing altogether, document that. Try to find out what it would cost (if there is a cost involved) to provide them, and document that too. Documentation can be written – but pictures are helpful too.
- ✓ Find out how much money your schools have, what the money is spent on, and where it comes from.
- An informal conversation with school district officials may be the best way to start. If you have a child in school, begin with your child’s principal; the Business Manager and Superintendent may also be helpful.
 - The actual budgets (including information on revenues as well as expenses) for your school and district are available to you under the Pennsylvania “Right to Know” Law. You can probably get access to this information simply by making an informal request to your Superintendent or Business Manager. If you have trouble getting access to budget information, contact the Education Law Center for a copy of “Getting Information About Your

School: Pennsylvania Laws on Open Meetings and Public Records.”

- You can also get information concerning revenue and expense information for your school and district on the web, although this information is likely to be less up-to-date than the information you can get from your district directly. Go to the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, www.pde.state.pa.us, (click on “public schools,” then “finances”); and/or go to www.schoolmatters.com.
- ✓ You don’t have to limit your investigation to your own school or school district. You may want to get information about neighboring districts, where the situation may in some respects be better or worse than your own. Besides obtaining figures, consider contacting community groups in that district.
- ✓ Try to crystallize your findings and concerns. What are your school’s and district’s funding problems, and what effect do those problems have on the educational opportunities provided to children?

Making Your Voice Heard on Local Decisions

You can have a voice in some important local decisions related to school funding. These decisions are made by school administrators, school boards, and in some situations by voters.

- ✓ In most districts (excluding Philadelphia and a few others), the school board sets a property tax rate annually, usually in the spring. Depending on the district, the school

board may also determine other tax rates (such as a personal income tax).

- ✓ The school board also adopts a budget each year, also typically in the spring. The board may also approve or disapprove specific expenditures during the course of the year.
- ✓ You can make your views known on any or all of these issues, in advance (by contacting board members directly or by getting the media interested, or both), and at board meetings. School board meetings are open to the public; agendas must be posted in advance, and time must be provided for public comment. Reporters often attend board meetings; don't hesitate to share your information and concerns with any reporters you see. For a copy of "Getting Information About Your School: Pennsylvania Laws on Open Meetings and Public Records," contact the Education Law Center.
- ✓ In most districts (again excluding Philadelphia), school boards are elected. You can support or oppose candidates based on their views on how district funds should be spent – and, for that matter, on how much funding should be raised locally. You can also run for a seat on the school board. The Education Policy and Leadership Center, www.eplc.org, provides information and training that may help you if you choose to do so. (EPLC also offers training to board members once they have been elected.)
- ✓ School administrators, especially superintendents and principals, also have some say in how district funds are spent. Many of these officials are open to considering your input, especially if you are open to hearing their perspective as well. Parents also have legal rights, under the No

Child Left Behind Act, to participate in certain key decisions, including decisions that may relate to spending, at the school and district level. Contact the Education Law Center for more information about these legal rights.

Influencing the General Assembly

At the “macro” level, it’s the state’s system for funding schools – the system designed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly, with input from the Governor – that’s the issue. We need the state to pay a bigger share of the cost of providing each student with an adequate public education, which would almost certainly require raising state taxes by some amount. (Of course, local taxes could go down if this happened.) We also need a more equitable system – that is, one that helps districts compensate for problems caused by low community wealth, and does not spend state money unnecessarily on districts that are already funding their schools at above-adequate levels. Only the General Assembly can give us such a system.

If you’re thinking that this means a lot of traveling to Harrisburg, you can relax. All politics, or at least most politics, is local. You can probably have more impact on your state senators and representatives by getting to them where they live – in their (your) home districts.

Here are some actions that you, or a group of which you are a member, can take to try to interest your legislators in these issues.

- ✓ Find out who your legislators are. You can do that easily from the website of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, www.legis.state.pa.us (click on “Find Members” at upper right). You may also want to find out about other legislators who represent nearby areas.

- ✓ Find out about your legislators' interest and track record in the area of public education.
 - Biographical information is available on the legislator's website.
 - You may also find that the website includes copies of newsletters that the legislator has sent to his or her constituents. If not, you can go to the legislator's office and pick them up there.
 - It's easy to do an internet search for statements that your legislators may have made concerning public education.
 - Good Schools Pennsylvania (www.goodschoolspa.org) is an excellent source of information about where your legislators stand on these issues.

- ✓ Get information on proposals that are pending in the state legislature. *Besides researching these proposals on your own, you can ask your legislators' offices to provide you with information about them.* This can be a good approach, both because your legislators' offices may have an easier time getting the information than you will, and because your request tells your legislators that these are issues of importance to constituents.

Here are some examples of proposals that you might ask about:

- Rep. Nicholas Micozzie is preparing to introduce a Successful Schools Budget proposal in the fall of 2005.

- House Minority Leader H. William DeWeese has announced plans for a concurrent resolution to create a Commonwealth Commission on the Provision of Public Education. The group “will be charged with reviewing current public education institutions and funding formulae in all areas of the public sector.” For more information, visit www.pahouse.com/deweese.
 - Other bills and resolutions addressing school funding issues are likely to be introduced. For up-to-date information, contact Good Schools Pennsylvania (www.goodschoolspa.org), the Education Policy and Leadership Center (www.eplc.org), or the Education Law Center.
 - There may be proposals in related areas, such as proposals for changes to Act 72.
 - The 2006-07 budget process will begin in the fall of 2005, with discussions in the Executive Branch (the Department of Education and the Governor). By early spring 2006, the Governor will present his proposal to the General Assembly. The General Assembly will consider the proposal, make revisions, and adopt a final budget by July 1, 2006.
- ✓ You’ll have to decide what you think about these various proposals, and what, if anything, you want to say about them. The organizations listed above can help you make sense of them and weigh the pros and cons.

✓ Once you're clear about your position, take your concerns to a larger audience. The bigger the issue becomes in your local community, the likelier it is that concern will build and that your legislators will feel a need to respond.

- Talk with friends and neighbors. They'll know other people, so you'll be able to create a wider "buzz" – and you may discover some potential relationships (for example, with local community leaders) that you didn't know were there.
- Talk with job-related, civic or church groups of which you are a member.
- Use newsletters, church bulletins, on-line services, and other vehicles for publicizing your concerns.
- Use the media. Good Schools Pennsylvania (www.goodschoolspa.org) and the Education Law Center can help you with suggestions on how to do this. There are many possibilities, including:
 - Letters to the editor.
 - "Op-ed" pieces that appear on the editorial page.
 - Articles written by reporters whom you've managed to interest in an issue.
 - Editorials. These are written by the editorial board, which may be willing to meet with you.
 - Radio and TV reports and talk shows.

- ✓ Meet with your legislators. (Good Schools Pennsylvania and Education Law Center can provide suggestions and advice on how to set up and carry out these meetings.)
 - Share the information that you have gathered. Focus on local needs and local concerns as well as on the broader statewide picture. Talk about real people and real situations. Share documents and pictures.
 - If you've come across interested people who know your legislators, and whose views your legislators are likely to respect, make sure that those individuals are included in the process.
 - Teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members may be strong allies in the struggle for a better state funding system. These individuals bring an insider's knowledge to questions of what money can buy and why more money is needed. They may not yet have been asked to join the "fair funding" movement, but if you ask, you may find that they willingly accept. Consider enlisting them as partners in op-eds and letters to the editor, visits to legislators, and other similar activities.
 - Invite legislators to visit schools and meet with students, families, teachers and administrators. A "back to school day" for legislators can be effective.

- Ask your legislators to commit to doing something – for example, to support one or more of the pending proposals listed above. Legislators can “co-sponsor” any proposal with which they agree.
 - Keep in touch with your legislators, even if they have not agreed to your request. Advocacy often means going back, and back, and back again.
- ✓ Letter-writing campaigns to your legislators *and* the Governor can also be effective. Legislators frequently point out that they respond to what people contact them about – and when they don’t hear anything, they assume people aren’t concerned. (They also point out that even a few letters may be enough to get their attention.)
 - ✓ If you’ve managed to make school funding an issue in your community, you may find that, as elections approach, you can get candidates to declare their positions on the issue. Good Schools Pennsylvania and other organizations may be able to help with questionnaires and other materials.

Finally, once again: help is available. Don’t hesitate to contact the organizations listed in this section for information and assistance.