

On trial: Fair and adequate school funding for all Pa. children

The League of Women Voters of Indiana County and the statewide League believe we are responsible for educating all children in our state. Our Constitution also believes this when it promises that the General Assembly will “provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education.” But the General Assembly has been failing to provide fair support for decades.

Finally, Pennsylvania’s school children are having their day in court. On Nov. 12 the Commonwealth Court began hearing a case that sues the state because the legislature has not provided adequate and fair funding for schools. Here’s one funding picture to ponder — one of many:

Taxpayers in the relatively high-income New Hope-Solebury school district, where only 9.7 percent of students live in poverty, are taxed at 12.6 mils; state and local funding per child is \$30,144. Taxpayers in the low-income Reading district, where 94.7 percent of students live in poverty, are taxed at 25.9 mils; state and local funding per child is \$13,256. Rural Shenandoah Valley School District, in the anthracite coal region, taxes residents at a high rate, yet struggles to provide for students. It laid off teachers five years ago and hasn’t been able to restore art or music in its elementary school.

High tax rates in lower wealth communities bring deteriorating results: buildings, books, achievement, tutoring, technology, counseling, class size, teacher supports — they are all deteriorating in under-funded districts. More than half of all school districts are more than \$2000 behind in funding per student, one of the largest gaps in per-child spending in the country (see funding gaps by district at www.fundourschoolspa.org). Arkansas, Tennessee and Alabama are ahead of us in each state’s share of funding per pupil.

The Education Law Center and the Public Interest Law Center are bringing this lawsuit, William Penn School District et al. v. Pennsylvania Department of Education et al. Litigants include school districts, parents and organizations who are tracking the ways we do not give an equal opportunity for adequate learning to our Commonwealth’s children. Our legislators should not need a court order to compel them to solve this longstanding problem.

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