

ACHIEVING ADEQUACY AND EQUITY
FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING IN PENNSYLVANIA

A Western Pennsylvania School District's Story

Oral Remarks Presented by:

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Sto-Rox School District (Allegheny Co.)

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Capitol Rotunda

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S T O - R O X
S C H O O L D I S T R I C T



**Capitol Rotunda
Tuesday, June 05, 2007**

Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome everyone here today. I'd also like to thank Executive Director Janis Risch of Good Schools Pennsylvania for her invitation to present comments on current educational issues relevant to the Sto-Rox School District. Your presence in making the time to attend here today proves you are already advancing the cause for educational equity for *all* Pennsylvania school age children.

I am an elected school director in the Sto-Rox School District located in Allegheny County, PA. I first got involved in this worthy crusade for educational equity back in 1993, after winning my first term on the school board. Our former Superintendent at the time, Anthony Skender, and a small team from Sto-Rox were the lone rangers and lone soldiers fighting a battle for educational equity that few people were interested in entertaining. The primary obstacle back then was that we were lacking the power of a unified statewide voice. Throughout the last two decades I have participated in providing written testimony on the impact disparate state funding streams has on a school district's ability to provide standards-driven accountable education programs.

I'd like to take this time to tell you a little bit about the district for which I serve. The Sto-Rox School District is a small, poor school district of 1500 students, wrestling with various societal challenges that resulted from the collapse of the steel mill industry in Pittsburgh in the early 1980's. If Pennsylvania had not been so overly dependent on local property taxes to pay for public education, the effect of the collapse of this economic engine might not have been so thoroughly devastating to our community, which, in essence, set into motion a domino effect of decline. When the primary source of employment disappeared, the network of businesses and stores that catered to families with healthy incomes also disappeared. With the abandonment of the steel industry and the business community, the burden of supporting our schools fell increasingly to residents struggling with unemployment or underemployment. With insufficient state support for our schools, there was nowhere for property taxes to go but up.

Rising property taxes caused further problems...foreclosures on mortgages for some families.... while other families decided to move to other communities with lower taxes. With a weakening housing market, and continually declining property values -- the school district was forced to repeatedly raise property taxes to keep our schools open. Our property taxes now are the seventh highest in the state. It is not uncommon for the poorest communities to be shouldering the highest tax rates.

Our school district faces another challenge. Like many former rust-belt communities with sustained and chronic underemployment, many of our families and students are deeply impacted by poverty. We have great concern for our students and worry about their nutrition, basic health care, non-functional families, teenage pregnancy and dropout rates, dependency on drugs and alcohol, as well as suicide and depression.

Given the socio-economic status of our community, we place great emphasis on meeting the needs of all learners – including the 25% of our students who require special education services. But here is another place where Sto-Rox is a victim of an outrageously flawed funding system.

State subsidies for special education cover only one-third of our overall special education costs. For example, our special education expenditures for our last fiscal year were \$3,691,991 and special education subsidy revenues from the state were \$955,378. As such, our board was forced to levy nearly 9 mills of local property taxes to fund the over two million dollars of special education expenses not covered by the state.

Allow me to provide another example of the stark comparison of the financial realities among school districts in Pennsylvania. Earlier this decade, two school districts in Allegheny County constructed or renovated athletic stadiums, costing in excess of \$10 million dollars each. Both of those communities were able to afford to build 10 million-dollar athletic stadiums without increasing their property tax levies.

However, around the same time, we at Sto-Rox were constructing a \$10 million-dollar middle school building, which was badly needed to replace a depilated school building that was over 70 years old. We had substantial difficulty funding the construction of this building and had to levy 5 mills of taxes to cover the debt service payments.

As a school director, I am charged by the state to submit a balanced budget which requires my school district to live within its means. However, the reality is, that living within its means for an affluent suburban school district includes the ability to install an Astroturf football field. However, for poor communities like Sto-Rox, living within our means may result in our having to forego hiring a needed guidance counselor to support our at-risk children.

In a study by Dr. William Cooley, of the University of Pittsburgh, entitled “The Difficulty of the Educational Task,” the researcher found that “those districts with the easiest educational task often times have the most resources available to them and those districts with the most difficult educational task often times have the least resources available to accomplish their respective goals.”

Yes, we need property tax relief in the Sto-Rox School District, but most importantly, we need the state to ensure that adequate funds are available to all school districts, and that the tax burden for supporting public education is distributed more equitably across the Commonwealth! We need our state legislators to make public education a priority in this year’s state budget – and show leadership in crafting a sound school funding formula that ensures every school district has the resources to provide a high-quality education.

The school finance system in Pennsylvania is a woefully inadequate and broken system that tolerates vast inequities among our state’s 501 school districts. As a society, we have a responsibility to provide all students, regardless of the income of their parents or the community in which they live, an equal educational opportunity.

This is the American ethic, a primary belief that in our society, a meritocracy exists, that a child’s success is determined by his/her individual qualities and not by

the income level of his/her parents or the color of his/her skin or the value of property in his/her school district. I am left to wonder if we are unknowingly witnessing a practice of educational apartheid against students that happen to live in poor communities. Simply stated, as long as local taxes remain the basis for school funding, we will continue to tolerate a system that produces rich and poor school districts.

As an elected Sto-Rox School Director representing the citizens of our community I am a proud supporter of the Pennsylvania School Funding Reform Campaign and I stand as a proud partner with Good Schools Pennsylvania (GSPA), The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) and the Education Law Center (ELC) and their statewide leadership efforts regarding educational equity for *all* Pennsylvania students.

I can say with absolute certitude that if we had had a state-wide network like this fifteen years ago we would be enjoying and realizing equity for all children right now **TODAY!** Too often, we as school board members and other concerned citizens urge our legislators to fight for a greater slice of the limited state pie for school funding for our individual school district because it is growing...or because it is small...or because it is taxed out...or because it is poor.

But as we are discovering today, there is great power in the numbers of parents and professionals and policy makers that are signing on to join us in this crusade to make meaningful change happen for the betterment of all Pennsylvania's children. As long as we continue to find common cause with each other, the impact we can have on public education is beyond anyone's expectation (or imagination) right now.

In closing, Lillian Katz, an esteemed early childhood educator, captures the essence of the Pennsylvania School Funding Reform Campaign mission:

"Each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children and grandchildren is intimately linked to the welfare of all other people's children. After all, when one of our children needs lifesaving surgery, someone else's child will perform it. If one of our children is threatened or harmed by violence, someone else's child will be responsible for the violent act. The good life for our own children can be secured only if a good life is also secured for all other people's children."

I commend each and every one of you for being here today to support this worthy cause and unite our efforts to bring about educational equity for all Pennsylvania school age children. Our students are counting on us!

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Edward J. Maritz, Jr.
School Director, Sto-Rox School District