

**Chancellor's Forum****State School Funding Method Unfair to City, Panelists Say**

by Jeff Lyons

Pennsylvania's method of funding schools is skewed against large urban districts like Philadelphia, making it harder for students here to get a quality education, panelists said at a Chancellor's Forum on education funding on Oct. 16.

U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, (D-Pa.), Philadelphia School District CEO Paul Vallas and parent activist and former teacher Helen Gym spoke at the event.

"We've got to make education the national security and civil rights issue of this generation. I need more money for the schools," Vallas told the more than 100 people in attendance. "I'm not going to make excuses about not being able to improve the schools because I don't have enough money, but clearly, we're ready to go to the next level. And going to the next level will involve a renewed and expanded commitment in funding what is clearly the most pressing and most



Philadelphia School District CEO Paul Vallas (left) talks about education funding as U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah looks on at an Oct. 16 Chancellor's Forum.

important issue facing the city, and that's the quality of education."

Vallas said an increase in funding would be used to reduce class size,

which would then help to improve student performance.

"In the 501 school districts in the

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commonwealth, there are wide disparities between what is available in terms of the quality of classroom instruction and class size," Fattah said. "Those disparities are real and they correlate with outcomes. We want to create a circumstance where young people have a comparable outcome. We need to create a comparable opportunity for our young people."

"Paul, when we get a new mayor in Philadelphia, you're not going to be last in line for money, all right, I can tell you that," Fattah told Vallas. "You're going to be first in line."

"Obviously, if I were to be mayor, my passion is in the area of education, and it would be at the top of the list," he said. "I put education at the top of the list because one of the things that we know... is that if you raise educational attainment, every other life indicator improves." Fattah has yet to officially declare himself a candidate for mayor.

"You could not have designed a system that works to the disadvantage of poor people better than the system we now have. We have a property-tax-based school system. Years ago, during the Nixon administration, a commission found that as long as the nation had a property tax funded school system, poor children would suffer. It's still true today. It's simple. Poorer communities aren't going to be able to generate enough funds to make sure their chil-



Photo by Jeff Lyons

Helene Gym talks about the success of her daughter's West Philadelphia school as Congressman Chaka Fattah looks on at the Oct. 15 Chancellor's Forum.

dren go to properly funded schools. They're not going to get a comparable education to other students and they're going to do poorly," Fattah said.

Gym, a former Philadelphia teacher who is also the former editor of Public School Notebook, an independent quarterly education newspaper for public school parents and teachers, has a 9-year-old daughter attending a West Philadelphia school.

Despite cuts in funding and staff, her daughter's

school has thrived, thanks to the work of a caring and nurturing staff, Gym said.

She said that more than 60 percent of the city's public schools have no art and music teachers and that her

daughter has yet to take an art class. "And as a 9-year-old, she certainly is entitled to one. It is shocking in the way that our children are disregarded," she said.

"We make choices in our state. We choose to spend \$37,000 per prisoner and only \$3,500 per child. We choose to

understand that in Lower Merion, we can spend \$20,000 per child, \$13,000 of which goes to instruction. In Philadelphia, we spend \$10,000 per child, and only \$5,800 goes into instruction. We want quality funding, not just equitable funding," Gym said.

"We are reaching our limit to what we can do with the limited resources we have," Vallas said. We've [improved test scores] with a funding level of about \$9,000 per child. We've done this without any significant increase in funding from the city since the takeover in 2002. But now we need to decide whether or not we're going to get to the next

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level. There is nothing that will have a greater impact on this school district in terms of taking us to the next level than reducing class size and getting class size down to a manageable level. There's nothing more important than that. But that's not going to happen unless there's a significant increase in both the state's and the city's funding commitment to its schools."

"To reduce class size in every single grade would cost us about \$10 million. We also need an increase in our capital plan so we can make the renovations and additions that will give us room to reduce class size. We can complete our classroom modernization. So maybe you're going to be going to school in a big ugly building, but that classroom, with its smart boards and its white boards and its windows and its laptop computers will be an educational environment equal if not superior to the suburbs," Vallas said.

