

STATEWIDE COALITION TO CLOSE THE GAP
“ The Quality of a Child’s Education Should Not
Depend on Where the Child Lives ”

Dear Candidate for the General Assembly,

This Spring we asked you to commit to supporting a major overhaul of Pennsylvania’s inadequate and highly unequal system of funding public education which leaves so very many school districts unable to provide the high quality education our children deserve and our future as a thriving commonwealth requires.

As you know, the state Constitution places responsibility for “establishing and maintaining a thorough and efficient system of public education” on the General Assembly – on you if your candidacy is successful. The Pa Supreme Court has refused to address this fundamental problem but placed it entirely in the legislature’s control.

The problem is that Pennsylvania has the 7th most unequal system of funding schools among all the 50 states. In fact the structure of school inequality in our state is unique – affecting nearly 80 percent of the school districts. In Pennsylvania more than half of the districts (268) have gaps greater than \$3,000 per student and fully three-quarters of the districts (380) have gaps greater than \$2,000 per student compared with the average of the top 20 percent of school districts.

This means that 268 are spending at least \$75,000 less in each classroom of 25 students, compared with the top districts; 380 districts are spending at least \$40,000 less in such classrooms– amounts sufficient to pay for those education changes which have proven to make large differences for children: small class sizes, pre-school and after school programs, superb science laboratories, up-to-date libraries, college and job counselors sufficient to serve each child well.

The per pupil spending gap (from the average of the top 100 districts) for each school district in the legislative district you are seeking to represent can easily be found on the enclosed list of school districts arranged by county, along with the current equalized local property tax rate (the statewide average is 20 mills).

The problem lies in Harrisburg not providing poor districts with the resources necessary for successful schools, not with the local school districts’ tax policies. Many of the districts with high gaps have tax rates well above the statewide median. It is the state’s failure to correct for the huge differences in fiscal resources available to each district that is at the base of the problem. The severe anomalies which arise are illustrated on an accompanying page with two examples showing that Reading taxes at twice the rate of Treddyfn and still has \$7,140 less to spend per student, and South Allegheny has a tax rate 60 percent great than Quaker Valley yet has \$5,274 less to spend per student. This is truly a dysfunctional system!!

The local property tax bill passed in June will not change the school finance gaps. It just substitutes a state dollar in place of a local property tax dollar rebated to a senior citizen. What's problematic about that bill is that it locks in the existing inequalities by requiring a local referendum before allowing any increase in local taxation higher than the rate of inflation (unless the increase is for a specified exemption). In California a similar cap and referendum proposition resulted over 25 years in reducing California schools from the best public schools in the country to tie with Mississippi for the worst. Such cap and referendum requirements, after the gross inequalities of school funding are corrected, would be of course a very different matter.

Thankfully, the Governor and legislature over the last three years also passed appropriations which increased funding for the poorest districts more than the general increase, narrowing the stark resource gaps which would otherwise exist. For most districts the increases made it easier to meet their current budget, but the funds are insufficient to decrease class size or start programs which are commonly found in well funded high-quality schools.

As a consequence, most of your districts still need new funding for their students to achieve the academic success represented by the state standards for proficiency in reading and math. The Federal No Child Left Behind law demands that schools meet those standards, but it will not be done by districts in poor communities unable to spend what successful districts have shown is necessary. A costing-out study commissioned this summer by the legislature will be available in early 2007 to supplement the analysis which lay behind the Successful Schools Budget bills proposed in recent legislative sessions. This General Assembly commissioned study will provide the opportunity for the 2007-08 General Assembly in which you seek a seat to address and secure the school finance reform so widely looked for across the state and so important to the future of Pennsylvania's children and the economic growth and well being of the Commonwealth.

We will again publicize the candidates who have agreed to support this important priority. Because you agreed to these principles in the spring it is not necessary to sign on again. We want to thank you for your commitment and urge you to challenge your opponent to do so too.

We also are asking in the course of your campaigning in the weeks ahead that you tell your constituents of the resource shortfalls affecting your schools, the reasons for them, and their cost in terms of good education and economic growth. Tell them you vigorously support the principle that all students, no matter where they live, should have access to successful schools which are able to meet state performance standards. Tell them of your own firm commitment to pursue the this crucial matter to a prompt and satisfactory resolution in the next General Assembly.

If you wish any further information, please contact us at PaCloseTheGap@aol.com . As we pointed out in our Spring letter, the following websites contain much information useful to you and your constituents: www.pilcop.org/efq.mpl, , www.eplc.org, www.elc-pa.org, and , www.goodschoolspa.org.

Thank you for working to help Pennsylvania's students.

The Statewide Coalition to Close the Gap

Joseph F. Bard
Pennsylvania Association of Rural and
Small Schools
jfbard@parss.org

Michael Churchill
Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia
mchurchill@pilcop.org

Linda Croushore
Mon Valley Education Consortium
lcroushore@mvec.org

Thomas K. Gilhool
Co-Convener, Council of former PA
Secretaries of Education
tgilhool@pilcop.org

Gary Harke
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
g.harke@pachurches.org

Liz Healey
Pittsburgh School Board, (former)
Chairperson, PaTASH
lhealey@pealcenter.org

Elizabeth Milner, President
League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania
Liz.milner@verizon.net

Rev. Robert P. Shine
President, Statewide Coalition of Black
Clergy

Shelly D. Yanoff
Philadelphia Citizens for Children & Youth,
shellyyanoff@pccy.org

Cheryl Zaleski
Coatsville Taxpayers Alliance
czaleski@casdtaxpayeralliance.com

PaCloseTheGap@aol.com

