



U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah speaks during a panel discussion of the Philadelphia Bar Association Chancellor's Forum, "How Pennsylvania School Funding Jeopardizes Philadelphia's Future."

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Giving students a fair education

Vallas, Fattah push for more school funding at forum

By Regan Toomer
Tribune Staff Writer

In a public forum held yesterday, school officials, parents and a prominent politician discussed the current state of school funding and the School District of Philadelphia's current budget woes.

School District of Philadelphia CEO Paul Vallas called upon the city of Philadelphia to get the school district back on track with funding.

To prove his argument for more local funding, Vallas listed the school district's accomplishments during his tenure — including his Declaration of Education goals — before adding that most were done without much funding from the city.

"We've done all of these things despite no significant increase in funding from the city since the takeover in 2002," Vallas said. "Now, we need to

decide whether or not we need to get to the next level."

Vallas joined U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah and Helen Gym, a former teacher and parent activist in a panel discussion hosted by the Philadelphia Bar Association on "How Pennsylvania School Funding Jeopardizes Philadelphia's Future (And What Can You Do About It)."

The publication Education Week recently ranked Pennsylvania among the most unequal states in the nation — 43rd out of 50 — in the area of education funding. State data shows if Philadelphia were able to spend the same amount as the average district in the city's five-county region, it would need \$2,125 more per student.

Philadelphia, the largest school district in the state, is facing a financial crisis. Last week, Vallas revealed the district has a \$21 million budget deficit.

There was little talk about the budget deficit during the panel discussion; instead more of a plea for more funding. Vallas pointed out that he asked Mayor John F. Street for \$10 million when he became CEO in 2002, which, he said, has yet to come.

There was also discussion from Vallas and Gym on reducing class size as a way to save money. Philadelphia has the highest class sizes in the region and those numbers are expected to increase during the 2006-07 school year due to budget cuts.

"There is nothing that would have a greater impact on this school district in terms of taking this school district to the next level, than reducing class size and getting class size down to a manageable level," Vallas said.

Ideally, Vallas said, classrooms should have no more than 22 kids in classrooms and

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no more than 16 kids in primary grade classrooms. He said that is a goal they would like to achieve.

"There is no (bigger) undertaking than that, but that is not going to happen unless there is a significant increase in both the state and the city's funding commitment to its schools," he said.

Gym agreed that class size is directly affected by school funding. As a former teacher in the district, Gym is actively involved in the Home and

School Council for Samuel Powel Elementary, a small school that was nearly stripped of its funding and teachers during budget cuts earlier this spring.

Gym said an example of large class size in the district is how Cook-Wissahickon School opened this year with 46 kids in kindergarten.

"We want quality funding and not just equitable funding," Gym said.

Fattah said he looked at disparities at the federal level in education in the United States, which affects funding.

"The disparities that exist in funding play themselves out of other funding," he said. "When we look at the quality of teachers - that is teachers that have majored in minored in the classrooms that they are teaching - classroom size, access to technology, textbooks, access to counselors ... all of it works against the interest of children who start out in a deficit or difficult position from a socioeconomic standpoint. If we want to create a circumstance where young people have a comparable outcome, we need to provide a comparable opportunity for those young people."

He called the state the "ultimate loser," sharing findings from a Brookings Institute report, which found Pennsylvania conservative and behind other states.

"We are 49th out of 50 in terms of a number of our kids going on to college and you go through the list," Fattah said. "The only way we are ever going to move our state forward is to get all of our children a fair opportunity to learn."