



# **Fiscally Distressed School Districts**

## ***Senate Education Committee***

***January 24, 2012***

**TESTIMONY OF THE EDUCATION LAW CENTER**



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Since 1975, the **Education Law Center of Pennsylvania (ELC)** has worked to make good public education a reality for Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable children – poor children, children of color, children with disabilities, English language learners, children in foster homes and institutions, and others.

Our strategies include not only “traditional” legal work, but also training and information-sharing; advocating for new laws and policies in Harrisburg and Washington; and working with organizations and media. We’re especially proud of our many collaborations with citizen groups around the state.



## **Community circumstances are the ultimate keys to understanding and helping distressed school districts.**

Most distressed districts have very high poverty, high property taxes, and historically under-funded schools.

Businesses and homeowners are leaving many of these areas.

The schools have a high concentration of students with complex and costly learning needs (poverty, disability, ELL).



Given the community circumstances in distressed school districts, local revenue sources are not enough to provide quality opportunities to learn in the local schools to meet state academic standards for all children.

Unless the state ensures that adequate funding and other resources are available in all schools, the nearly inevitable results will be low academic outcomes, fiscal instability, unemployment, poor family health, high crime rates, and dependence on public benefits.



## **Strategic Solutions**

The challenges confronting particular school districts in fiscal and academic distress cannot be separated from the overall trends affecting local communities and other municipal government functions.

As resources have been drained from older municipalities, a growing number of cities, towns and suburbs are affected by shrinking tax bases upon which to support schools and municipal services, by skyrocketing property taxes, and by deteriorating infrastructure.



According to the Pennsylvania Economy League, 39 cities, 228 boroughs and 8 townships are in the worst stage of municipal decline, while hundreds of municipalities are not far behind.

The General Assembly cannot solve these complex and inter-related problems solely by focusing on how to turn around the distressed school districts.

The state must develop and implement integrated strategies that stabilize whole communities by better coordinating all state investments – including funding for schools, housing, transportation, public safety, sewer and water.

# Comparing Distressed and Non-Distressed School Districts

*Illustrations and Data*



**Lower Merion High School library (2011)**



**Olney East High  
School,  
Philadelphia  
(2008)**

“There is not  
one single book  
on any of the  
library shelves  
here.”



**Harriton High School in Lower Merion School District (2011).** “The state-of-the-art 850-seat auditorium will host theatrical productions, concerts and assemblies throughout the school year.”



## **Olney East High School, Philadelphia (2008).**

“Almost all of the classrooms have gates on the door which make students feel like they are in prison. We don’t have air conditioning in our school.”



**Harriton High School in Lower Merion School District. (2011). “Community members tour the new facility.”**



**Sto-Rox School District (2008).**  
“The future is mine.”



“**Suburban Square, Ardmore** is a historic mixed-use center in the heart of **Lower Merion**, featuring retail and offices. Relax in the pedestrian plaza in the center of Suburban Square.”



**Sto-Rox School District (2008).** “This photograph is just one of the many bars in McKees Rocks. I feel that there is no need for as many bars as we have. The bars just contribute to the poor reputation of McKees Rocks.”



**Lower Merion School District.** “Among the important ‘classrooms’ available to students are the many natural spaces found around the township. At Rolling Hill Park, the Lower Merion Conservancy educates students through historical walks, bird counting and stream monitoring.”



**York School District (2008).** “When I walk home from school, I see this gang graffiti everywhere. It reminds me that I need to stay away from gangs. When I graduate from high school I want to be a cop.”



**Sto-Rox School District (2008).** “The windows are broken and don’t have screens. Our ceilings are falling in and in some classrooms there are too many students. Every student deserves to go to a high quality school because we are the future.”

# Data Analysis

The following data show the differing circumstances in 14 school districts that were declared by the state to be in academic or fiscal distress during the last decade.

Common factors include:

- Significant community poverty
- High property taxes
- High concentration of costly students
- Inexperienced teachers
- Large class sizes
- Great improvements in academic achievement
- Overall school performance still below state averages

## High Property Taxes and Poverty

School District	County	2009-2010 Equalized Mills	Millage Rank in PA	2008 Adjusted Personal Income per ADM (per student)	Personal Income per ADM Rank in PA
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	27.6	26	\$90,934	462
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	27.6	27	\$59,679	498
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	21.3	127	\$195,750	92
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	29.6	12	\$88,032	469
Wilkinsburg Borough SD	Allegheny	40.1	1	\$141,899	226
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	21.5	120	\$98,959	430
Reading SD	Berks	23.0	85	\$46,392	499
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	27.5	30	\$79,682	484
Steelton-Highspire SD	Dauphin	24.7	57	\$90,997	461
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	20.5	155	\$43,000	500
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	26.4	43	\$117,064	342
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	18.8	209	\$76,799	489
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	18.2	234	\$99,745	423
York City SD	York	32.6	5	\$62,647	497
	STATEWIDE	21.4 (75th percentile)		\$162,163	21.4

## Local, State, and Federal Funding

School District	County	2009-10 Total Revenue per ADM (per student)	Total Rank	2009-10 Local Revenue per ADM	Local Rank	2009-10 State Revenue per ADM	State Rank	2009-10 Federal Revenue per ADM	Federal Rank
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	\$18,379	29	\$3,070	475	\$9,903	9	\$2,060	13
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	\$19,655	20	\$2,374	496	\$13,905	1	\$3,376	1
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	\$21,056	13	\$9,880	107	\$8,645	36	\$2,462	6
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	\$14,701	144	\$4,834	357	\$8,187	53	\$1,657	37
Wilkesburg Borough SD	Allegheny	\$17,795	37	\$7,981	182	\$7,465	109	\$2,349	10
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	\$17,126	49	\$4,499	384	\$9,801	11	\$2,823	2
Reading SD	Berks	\$12,641	334	\$2,267	497	\$7,969	74	\$2,004	17
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	\$17,042	50	\$6,172	268	\$8,084	62	\$2,785	4
Steelton-Highspire SD	Dauphin	\$14,559	157	\$4,949	353	\$8,304	46	\$1,164	133
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	\$14,949	124	\$2,713	486	\$9,984	7	\$2,189	12
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	\$14,146	185	\$5,977	281	\$6,328	181	\$1,765	27
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	\$11,039	474	\$3,928	426	\$5,870	208	\$1,181	129
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	\$13,275	264	\$4,122	407	\$6,779	149	\$2,352	9
York City SD	York	\$14,528	159	\$3,982	422	\$8,119	59	\$2,426	7
	STATEWIDE	\$13,854		\$7,751		\$4,927		\$996	

## State Funding Increases and Cuts

School District	County	8-Year Increase in Basic Education Funding (2003-04 to 2010-11)	Basic Ed Funding Increase Ranking in PA	2011-12 Total Final Cut PER STUDENT for BEF, ABG, CSR, EAP June 26, 2011
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	26.02%	274	\$893
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	34.13%	136	-\$1,477
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	32.50%	152	\$873
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	26.44%	264	\$776
Wilkinsburg Borough SD	Allegheny	27.26%	240	\$623
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	27.93%	226	\$702
Reading SD	Berks	122.08%	3	\$972
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	31.44%	164	\$502
Steelton-Highspire SD	Dauphin	42.39%	77	\$885
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	37.90%	103	\$1,097
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	67.84%	27	\$459
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	131.04%	1	\$522
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	43.93%	70	\$1,302
York City SD	York	64.57%	30	\$1,135
	<b>STATEWIDE</b>	<b>37.17%</b>		<b>\$485</b>

## High Concentration of Students with Complex and Costly Educational Needs

School District	County	School District Class at 2000 Census	2009-2010 Adjusted ADM (Student Enrollment)	2009-10 Poverty Concentration (based on free/reduced lunch data)	2008-09 Special Education Concentration	2009-10 English Language Learner Concentration	Overall % Costly Students Rank in PA
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	3	902.766	79.87%	25.82%	0.00%	5
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	3	810.418	50.59%	14.55%	0.00%	103
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	1a	28,359.453	70.45%	18.41%	1.26%	14
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	3	1,608.375	71.63%	22.74%	0.25%	10
Wilkinsburg Borough SD	Allegheny	3	1,560.095	70.51%	23.14%	0.51%	11
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	3	1,243.780	71.31%	19.22%	0.32%	13
Reading SD	Berks	2	17,263.391	90.28%	14.66%	20.40%	1
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	2	8,008.573	92.94%	20.15%	8.48%	2
Steelton-Highspire SD	Dauphin	3	1,270.377	68.17%	19.60%	1.65%	15
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	2	7,365.632	42.43%	14.00%	0.03%	190
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	2	11,148.773	77.94%	19.54%	17.91%	4
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	2	18,544.966	73.24%	13.96%	11.08%	8
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	1	207,532.226	61.42%	11.20%	5.87%	38
York City SD	York	2	7,580.412	81.00%	20.57%	15.95%	3
	<b>STATEWIDE</b>		<b>1,757,319.548</b>	<b>36.53%</b>	<b>14.78%</b>	<b>2.52%</b>	

## Teacher Effectiveness and Pay

School District	County	2010-11 Classroom Teacher Salary	2010-11 Years of Experience Classroom Teacher	2010-11 Avg. Level of Education 4=BA 5=MS 6=PhD	2010-11 Number of Classroom Teachers	2010-11 Students (ADM) per Teacher
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	\$60,553	15.3	4.3	67	13
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	\$55,488	11.0	4.4	38	21
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	\$69,288	13.6	4.3	2,045	14
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	\$54,519	9.1	4.4	100	16
Wilkinsburg Borough SD	Allegheny	\$51,826	11.7	4.4	142	11
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	\$54,305	14.0	4.3	97	13
Reading SD	Berks	\$52,713	10.4	4.3	1,010	17
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	\$58,094	11.6	4.3	558	14
Steeltown-Highspire SD	Dauphin	\$50,700	9.2	4.4	101	13
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	\$59,355	10.9	4.5	275	27
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	\$57,575	10.8	4.4	741	15
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	\$59,756	11.3	4.4	1,117	17
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	\$65,304	11.5	4.0	10,277	20
York City SD	York	\$66,522	10.7	4.7	366	21
	<b>STATEWIDE</b>	<b>\$60,674</b>	<b>13.0</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>125,883</b>	<b>14</b>

## Academic Achievement

School District	County	<u>2003-04</u> PSSA District- Wide Avg Adv/Prof Combined Reading & Math	<u>2010-11</u> PSSA District- Wide Avg Adv/Prof Combined Reading & Math	8-Year PSSA Increase	PSSA Increase Ranking in PA	2010-11 Schools Making AYP / All Schools	2010-11 District AYP Status
Clairton City SD	Allegheny	27.1	42.8	57.56%	16	1/2	AYP
Duquesne City SD	Allegheny	14.8	25.7	74.24%	5	0/1	Warning
Pittsburgh SD	Allegheny	44.0	63.5	44.31%	40	32/57	AYP
Sto-Rox SD	Allegheny	31.7	42.9	35.47%	86	0/3	DI1
Wilkinsburg Borough SD	Allegheny	26.3	45.2	71.46%	7	2/5	AYP
Aliquippa SD	Beaver	25.9	51.2	97.24%	1	1/2	AYP
Reading SD	Berks	35.2	56.0	59.32%	14	6/24	CA2
Harrisburg City SD	Dauphin	21.1	37.4	76.87%	3	3/13	CA2
Steelton-Highspire SD	Dauphin	29.6	52.2	76.35%	4	1/2	AYP
Chester-Upland SD	Delaware	22.6	37.3	65.19%	8	2/9	CA2
Lancaster SD	Lancaster	36.3	52.5	44.83%	39	11/19	CA2
Allentown City SD	Lehigh	40.3	53.3	32.26%	106	11/20	CA2
Philadelphia City SD	Philadelphia	30.7	55.3	80.03%	2	120/259	CA2
York City SD	York	33.4	46.9	40.42%	58	3/9	CA2
	<b>STATEWIDE</b>	<b>60.2</b>	<b>75.3</b>	<b>25.08%</b>		<b>1457 / 2227</b>	<b>32 Districts not making AYP</b>



## **Crisis Management**

In responding to the needs of distressed districts, the state should focus on long term and sustainable plans to address the comprehensive needs of struggling districts.

Effective solutions are less likely to come in the form of short term responses to an emergency crisis.

The state constitution and other state and federal laws require the Commonwealth to step in to help the children in distressed school districts by providing adequate resources, technical assistance, and other forms of support.

## **What does NOT work to solve distressed district issues?**

Experience in Pennsylvania shows what usually does not work by itself - top down, one-size-fits-all state control managed out of a government office in Harrisburg.

As demonstrated by the data above, the academic and fiscal circumstances facing each distressed school district are often very different and will require different solutions.

The past efforts under the Empowerment Act, through the Philadelphia School Reform Commission, and other state-designed school management schemes have often not succeeded.

## **What does work to help distressed districts?**

Most struggling districts have local schools where teaching and learning are strong. These models can and should be duplicated.

Average academic performance in struggling districts has greatly improved in recent years. These reforms can be expanded.

Money matters to achievement and to retaining the best teachers and administrators. The state can work with district officials to invest in effective programs for student remediation, effective teaching, special education, English as a Second Language programs, and other positive initiatives.

Implementing effective remedies will not be quick, simple, inexpensive, or performed without community involvement.

## **What is the most effective role for the state?**

Ensure that all local district fiscal and academic reforms are made in a manner that involves:

- (a) A decision making, planning, and reporting process that includes students, parents and community leaders;
- (b) Public transparency and accountability through reporting;
- (c) Establishing progress benchmarks and measuring progress over time using multiple output and input measures;
- (d) Analyzing and reporting about the reasons for progress or failure;
- (e) Technical assistance and penalties to address noncompliance or inadequate progress;
- (f) Adequate funding to pay for needed reforms.

## **Why is state funding so important for distressed districts?**

Without adequate funding, all other remedies are unlikely to achieve comprehensive and enduring fiscal or academic success.

Adequate funding is also needed to attract and retain effective teachers and administrators, to provide the academic systems and supports needed for student success, and to provide the administrative systems needed for quality management.

## **Balancing local and state control:**

Some communities may choose themselves to use different models of school management, including district-managed school turnaround, university or privately managed school reforms, independent charter schools, or other options. Local direction and control of these decisions is needed to maximize long term sustainability.

Permanent state control of local school operations is not a viable solution. Full or partial short term state control may be required if all else fails and children will not otherwise receive an education meeting state standards. But the state should never precipitate this kind of crisis through its own actions or inactions, including auditing and monitoring district operations, providing technical assistance, or issuing adequate funding.

# Sources of Data

All data is from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), unless otherwise stated.

Academic Achievement Report –

<http://paayp.emetric.net/>

Assessment and AYP Results –

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school\\_assessments/7442](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442)

Teacher Data –

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/professional\\_and\\_support\\_personnel/7429](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/professional_and_support_personnel/7429)

Basic Education Funding --

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/education\\_budget/8699/basic\\_education\\_funding/539259](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/education_budget/8699/basic_education_funding/539259)

Financial Reports –

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries\\_of\\_annual\\_financial\\_report\\_data/7673/afr\\_excel\\_data\\_files/509047](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries_of_annual_financial_report_data/7673/afr_excel_data_files/509047)

**The Education Law Center appreciates the attention and consideration of the Senate Education Committee to these important issues.**



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