Faith and Reason Honors Program

Senior Thesis

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A Call for Equality in Educational Opportunities for All Students

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Abstract

The United States at large is experiencing a crisis in education. Sufficient funds are not being provided to all districts in order for the districts to provide students with a quality education. Students in the poorest districts that need the greatest amount of resources and services are not receiving them because of the discrepancies that exist in educational funding. An education should serve as a level playing field for students, but instead, funds are being cut in districts that need the most assistance. This paper looks at the origins of funding for the education system, the problems that arise due to the inequality of funding, and the current outlook of education for the local area, as well as a few possible solutions to this problem of inequality in education due to an inequality of funding in schools. The U.S. needs to realize that an investment needs to be made in the education of students today who represent the future of the nation.
Mercedez, a 2nd grade student, sits next to me, a ripped and highlighted book in her hands. As I point to the different words, she attempts to write sentences for each spelling word. The only problem is, she writes below the level of the average 2nd grade student because her parents could not afford to send her to preschool. As we try to form sentences, Mercedez becomes more and more frustrated. She claims she is not smart enough to read or write. I tell her that it is okay if she wants to take a break for a few minutes and then come back to this, but at this suggestion, tears well up in her eyes. She explains to me that neither of her parents can read nor write English, so there is no one to help her at home. She even told me that she gets in trouble at school because her homework is not completed. When her teacher sends notes home to Mercedez’s parents telling them, they cannot even read them; they just get angry at her because they think she is misbehaving in school.

At the same moment, a little girl named Ari comes over to me; Ari is also in second grade, but she attends a private school in Allentown. She looks at Mercedez’s homework and her tattered book and compares it to her own stack of brand new interactive textbooks. Ari also pulls out her spelling homework that she has to do for the night, glancing over to Mercedez’s work to compare. Ari looks at me and asks with a quizzical expression in her eye, “Ms. Ashley… Why are we in the same grade but her words are so easy?” Meanwhile, I know Mercedez has been struggling with these words for the last hour. Mercedez looks into my eyes, desperately seeking answers that I wish I had, but all I can do is look back at her and search for a reason I can give her that will justify her lack of opportunity created by these urban school districts that do not have the resources to provide a quality education to the students who need it the most.
As a History and Secondary Education major here at DeSales, I have always been passionate about helping others, as well as 100% positive that my calling has been education. I graduated from Quakertown High School, so I was always privileged to have great teachers, endless materials, and an unlimited amount of opportunities to take advantage of in order to build my resume for college. When I arrived at DeSales, I heard of a tutoring program through the Center for Service and Social Justice Department where I would be tutoring young children at an elementary school in conjunction with a music program titled El Sistema. This after-school program had a mission of empowering urban students through music, while also aspiring to positively impact the community. After going once, I instantly developed a passion for helping with the program and the students. It was not until I started to help in the Allentown School District that I began to see the injustice that plagues the urban schools only a few miles from where I graduated. I could not understand how so many districts I had been in for my education certification and various other activities could be so close together but be so different. How could it be that so many districts, Saucon Valley, Southern Lehigh, Quakertown, Salisbury, and Allentown are only within a few miles of one another, but the inequalities that exist are so immense?

So I began to wonder, where does the discrepancy begin? How has the inequality become so apparent? How can it be that Ari and Mercedez experience two very different education systems, yet they only live a few miles from one another? These students that are born into poor school districts do not have the same opportunities for education. An education should serve as a level playing field. Students should be able to use their education to pursue careers and break the cycle of poverty they were born into. But instead, schools continue to cut staff, early education
programs, and allow the achievement gap to deepen. We cannot expect these students to help themselves. They need assistance and a quality education. In the words of St. Francis DeSales, “We must never undervalue any person.” All students deserve the right to a quality education, but sadly this is just not a reality for many students in the nation, mainly due to an inequality in funding.

When examining why such a discrepancy exists, the problem really begins in the budgeting process. To begin, education is funded through three different levels, each playing a different role and contributing a different proportion to the total budget. These three areas are the federal, state, and local governments. When looking at the actual education budget, it is important to remember that funding not only determines the salary teachers receive, professional-development opportunities, and access to different resources, but “it also influences the quality of schools by allowing districts to do such things as reduce class sizes and recruit and retain qualified teachers” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 223). To even grasp an idea of the vastness of the education system, consider this statistic, “In 2010, nearly 50 million students were attending public schools at a cost of $540 billion dollars” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 223). This is a tremendous amount of students as well as an immense sum of money needed to facilitate the education system. Because the amount of money needed to even open school doors all across America is so tremendous, one has to wonder where the money comes from to fund the system, as well as how the federal, state, and local government responsibilities to fund education are determined.

Before looking at the specifics of school funding and how the different levels of government contribute, another concept that is important to understand is that schools are
controlled by the local level of government because there is no mention of education in the Constitution of the United States. This was purposefully done because the founding fathers of the country wanted many aspects of life to be ruled by the people that were closest and in greatest contact with the community being affected. Technically the nation does not have to provide any funding to schools nationwide because it is not written anywhere in the Constitution; this causes great debate in funding disputes. Therefore, the federal government does not have any obligation to provide any money to fund education. This also means that if the federal government does provide some funding, it does not require equality in this funding to different school districts (Berliner & Biddle, 2002, p. 10). Similarly, there continues to be discrepancies in funding between states because many of their Constitutions do not mention education either. For example:

Differences in state rulings are primarily the result of differences in the wording of state constitutions: Some constitutions are quite specific in guaranteeing ‘equal education for all,’ whereas others are vague in specifying that education opportunity should be ‘ample’ or ‘sufficient.’ (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 232)

Yet, because there is no mention of education in the Constitution, education falls under the jurisdiction of the states that can control it as they see fit. Despite education being a local responsibility, many still call on the federal and state levels that they have a duty and obligation to help fund schools.

First, a look at how the nation has historically funded education will be examined. To give an idea of the funding trends over time, “From 1920 to 1980, the federal share increased from virtually nothing to a peak of nearly 10%, declining in the 1980s to less than 7% before
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rising to its current level of 8.5%" (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 22). To put the extent of funding into perspective, though the federal support of the education budget has improved over time, the “total still accounts for about 2% of all federal expenditures” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 226). This means that out of the entire federal budget, only 2% is given to education. Although this amount is meager, there are also other contributions that the federal government makes that do make a considerable impact, with most of them occurring in the form of grants. One such example is in the form of federal grants that are targeted for specific groups and purposes (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 226). An example of this would be Head Start programs, which are aimed at helping families send their children to a preschool program who otherwise could not afford it. The money designated for this effort alone has been very impactful. During the 1980s, categorical funds were replaced by block grants, so instead of states and districts having to use the money they were given by the federal government for a specific initiative, they had fewer restrictions. Some districts agreed with these grants because they claimed the local taxpayers would know better how the money needed to be spent when compared to federal people, yet some argued that it allowed districts to misspend the monies or spend them in areas that were not necessary (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 226).

Although the Constitution provides no legal basis for the federal government to provide any sort of educational funding, many continue to call on the nation to assist in the education crisis that is upon us. There have been variations over time of how schools are funded. In the beginning of early America, the responsibility of education was taken care of by local governments.
Twentieth-century leaders saw a direct connection between education and the country’s political and economic well-being. Quality schools and a well-educated workforce became national concerns, and the federal government’s role in education increased. Similarly, states began to recognize the importance of education in attracting high-tech industries and high-paying jobs. (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 226)

Clearly the nation and states saw that education needed to be a priority because the economic health of both the nation and the states were dependent on the quality of the education system. The nation and states need to continue to embrace this philosophy to realize that they are educating the future of America. If they would just invest in the education of the students, many of the other changes that they want to make would follow. As this trend continues, more and more the federal government is being looked at to help with the crisis of the education system. Although there are some who agree with funding staying in local hands because “local funding, they say, makes schools more efficient and responsive to local needs and wishes” (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 226), they still agree that there needs to be a consistency for the nation, as well as the nation should provide funds from the national budget. Proponents say that the federal government needs to be involved if they want the U.S. to continue to strive in the 21st century. They say there needs to be a more controlled form of leadership that is consistent across the country.

The second tier of educational funding is that given by the state government. Funds given by states are necessary and desperately needed. In fact, “States contribute the largest source of educational funding, accounting for nearly half of the monies that go into schools” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 224). The money contributed to the education budget by the state comes from
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a few different sources. This money comes from state income taxes, sales taxes, and a third special tax that deals with taxes on liquor and tobacco, as well as corporate sales taxes. Important to also mention is that sales taxes are regressive, which helps to assist lower-income families who need to spend a majority of the money they earn on necessities. Although some states do a great job providing their share of funding, gaps demonstrate that “Many state governments continue to neglect their responsibility to provide low-income students with a high-quality education, thus subverting the War on Poverty’s prime purpose” (McNeil, 2014, p. 2). A problem that exists is that even though states have increased their spending on education, they are not connecting their school finance and funding formula to “the actual cost of delivering rigorous standards to give all kids the chance to achieve those standards” (McNeil, 2014, p. 2). In other words, they need to use the money as efficiently as possible. Mr. Henderson (President and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights) has been quoted to say that, “The failure to provide equal funding, the failure to provide quality education, is a violation of state’s’ responsibility to their own constitutions, but also a violation of the federal mandate about how education has to be implemented” (McNeil, 2014, p. 2). Like those proponents of a greater national contribution to education, there are also proponents that claim that the state needs to be taking more control of education. Even though their constitutions do not require them to provide funds, Henderson claims it is their duty to the people to provide a quality education.

Now a look at the level of most importance: the local government tier. The tradition of funding education locally dates back to the beginning of the United States, where different local towns decided to come together to educate the children living in the community. The use of local property taxes to fund education came at the end of the 19th century, but demographics began to
change over time. While many people had flocked to cities for work earlier in American history, this pattern began to change when suburbs emerged outside of cities. Families that could afford to leave, looking for a chance to better themselves and live in new houses; they began to play the game of keeping up with society and consuming as many goods as possible. After this demographic change, these new suburban families did not want the money that they were paying on their property taxes, which was higher than those in the urban community; to go anywhere near the city to educate the students that had been left behind whose parents could not afford to move (Berliner & Biddle, 2002, p. 3).

Because almost half of the funding for public schools in the United States comes from local property taxes, urban districts are already at a disadvantage. Even besides the smaller amount of taxable property in urban areas compared to suburban areas, cities also have many nonprofit organizations such as hospitals and museums that do not pay taxes to the city; yet, people that do not live in the city still enjoy the benefits of these organizations (Berliner & Biddle, 2002, p. 1). The fact of the matter is, the districts that get the least amount of funding are the districts filled with students that need the greatest amount of support and resources. There are high concentrations of students who need English as a Second Language classes, as well as additional help in reading and math. Budget cuts have led to many students not receiving any instruction before kindergarten, already putting them at a disadvantage when they begin their school years. Other countries have already seen that funding education primarily on local wealth is a problem. The U.S. is the only nation that does not control the budget and distribute money based on need (Berliner & Biddle, 2002, p. 2). This fact in itself calls for reform to begin.
After examining the local government funding structure and the disparities that do indeed exist, it becomes clear that these districts will continue to fall into poverty because of the way in which the schools are funded. Ultimately, local level financing comes from local school boards. These are the people that, approve the budget and decide where to allocate different funds, grow or cut certain programs, and make the overall tough decisions about what needs to be cut if the funding cannot extend as far as expectations. The disparity between the funding in urban districts and suburban districts comes down to this one fact, “At the local level, most funding for schools comes from property taxes, which are determined by the value of property in the school district” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 225). Because urban districts do not have as much property, a pattern of failure and an anticipation of the continuance of the poverty cycle seem imminent when looking at property tax funding.

In continuing to examine the disparities that exist among school districts, besides property taxes, there are also other local revenue sources. These include, “income taxes, fees for building permits, traffic fines, and user fees charged to groups that hold meetings in schools,” but local property taxes continue to be the most important (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 225). Property taxes are collected by local authorities who assess the value of the property, and then “tax the owner a small percentage of the property’s value (usually less than 1%)” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 225). But funding through local property tax has many disadvantages, first and foremost being that inequalities between the property values and resources that exist in different districts is very apparent.

Wealthier cities or districts have a higher tax base, so they’re able to collect (and spend) more money for their schools. Poorer rural and urban school districts find themselves on
Property taxes also hurt older people and put more of a burden on them because their house may have increased in value, but their ability to pay taxes remains the same or may have even decreased due to economic pressures. Some older people also fight having to pay these local property taxes because they argue that they no longer have children in the school system; they also claim that they do not see the real benefit of increased spending in schools (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 225). Another problem with local property taxes is that these taxes are more visible than the sales tax. Instead of being taken in small increments, these taxes need to be paid in a chunk, so they are more obvious and visible to taxpayers; this increases dissatisfaction with the whole process. To look at the gap in spending between affluent and poor districts, “Nationally, wealthy districts in some states spend 56% more on their affluent students than do poorer ones” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2014, p. 232). This is a problem because the poor districts are the ones who need the most help; if they are receiving the least amount of money, they will not just stop from improving, they will also continue to fall further behind and increase the achievement gap. Funding inequalities are also complicated because different districts have different needs. Some have higher proportions of students that speak English as a second language, live in poverty, or need special education services. Reforms in order to change this crisis of education are expensive, especially because wealthy districts do not want any of their money going to help the less fortunate; they want it all to stay within their district. The problem is, how will these others get help?
Before discussing some recent trends in educational funding, let us focus on the state of Pennsylvania to get an overview of some problems that exist due to the inequality and lack of funding. To give an idea about the size and number of students that are educated in Pennsylvania, the nation is split into 500 different school districts. Within the state of PA, there are five different sources of funding: Basic Education Funding, reimbursement of charter schools, Accountability Block Grants, Education Assistance Program, and School Improvement Grants (Bryant, 2001, p. 35). One of the major problems that Pennsylvania, like many other districts are facing now, is the fact that 90,000 students are enrolled in charter and cyber schools (Bryant, 2001, p. 35). Also important to note when looking at the overall health of the state is that “The state subsidy for special education was frozen for the third straight year” (Bryant, 2001, p. 35). Districts cut after-school and summer tutoring programs aimed to help with student achievement scores, as well as continue to eliminate foreign language programs in middle schools and high school business courses or consumer science courses (Bryant, 2001, p. 36). Due to the funding cuts in PA, many districts do not have any reserve funds left anymore since this is the third year they are facing budget cuts (Bryant, 2001, p. 37). These cuts are not just being felt in Pennsylvania. Evidence and national reports have been developed specifically stating that these problems exist all over the United States, and are becoming more apparent. The problem now is, what is going to be done to fix them?

Some recent trends in educational funding also need to be examined before looking at the specific problems that result from the lack of funding. It is important to mention that because “educational funding depends on taxes, and tax revenues fall when an economic recession hits the U.S. economy,” schools have suffered in recent years (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 226).
The Great Recession was also worsened by the sharp drop in property values in many states. As a result of this, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was “designed to provide an economic stimulus to a faltering U.S. economy” (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 227). The total amount allocated with this act was $115 billion. The funds were distributed in different ways, the first of which was in the form of “state stabilization funds to prevent teacher layoffs and cuts to programs in education” (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 227). Additional funds were also provided for Title I programs that target disadvantaged students, as well as for special education services.

Some new, one-time funds were also given to target specific areas such as “Head Start, homeless children, and teacher quality initiatives emphasizing performance pay” (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 227). While some progress and investment is being made, much more is needed to reform the education system.

While many argue that greater commitment needs to be made to education, there are some that argue that

The effects of funding on excellence in education are controversial, with early research concluding that the amount spent has little or no influence on achievement. More recent research, however, finds that higher per-pupil expenditures can result in higher achievement, if funds are used wisely and strategically. (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 229)

Therefore, although funds do need to be spent more wisely, there is evidence clearly demonstrating a positive relationship between per-pupil spending and student achievement. Most importantly, the greatest effect of increased expenditures is on low-income and minority
students, which makes it imperative that this needs to happen to help those students struggling the most (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 227). If this student population can benefit, increased spending should be a priority. Also important to note when examining school budgets, is that not all of the money goes towards instruction and achievement; 61% of the funding received by districts also addresses achievement indirectly through means such as maintenance of school, transportation, administration, instructional supports, and other services (Eggen & Kauchack, 2014, p. 227). Although these may not be expenses one looks at or considers initially, these are essential and necessary for even opening up the doors of a school in the morning. After looking at some current education funding trends, it is important to now turn to some indicators that demonstrate why these trends are not working and why.

When looking at the injustice that is being done to our students, there are a few key sources to look at that really provide the facts for the argument that the nation, as well as the state, and local governments are not doing everything they need to in order to provide a quality education for students. The first source that is going to be examined, which looks at education from a national perspective, is titled “A Nation at Risk”, which was written in April 1983 by The National Commission on Excellence in Education. This commission wrote this report to define the problem of education in the United States (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). They believed that if Americans knew about the threat to education, they would realize the responsibility they had to their country, and would come forward and start pushing for educational reforms. The people needed to reflect the philosophy of the President, who remained optimistic to education. President Reagan claimed, “Certainly there are few areas of American life as important to our society, to our people, and to our families as our schools and
colleges” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). This support from
the President came partly from an economically logic standpoint. He knew that in order to trade
goods with the rest of the world, people needed to be able to invent, engineer, and create these
goods. Therefore, he realized the importance of education to the entire nation. The report
continued to provide logic of why the rest of the United States should be stepping forward in
order to help with the crisis. The commission argued that a high level of education is necessary
to foster a common culture in the United States (The National Commission on Excellence in
Education, 1983, p. 2). This common culture comes from an education that all receive, regardless
of class or race. All individuals should be able to better themselves through education. The
reason this report called all Americans to act quickly to help with education was because they
noticed downward trends in educational performance in schools, and came to the conclusion that
the nation was in fact at risk.

One of the major findings from this study that left Americans uneasy was that there was a
decline in different test scores compared to other world powers. The United States worried they
were falling behind and realized they needed to work harder to catch American students up to the
levels of the rest of the world. Another conclusion that was found was that students were falling
behind in science and technology, and also that the skill sets developed in this generation would
not surpass the previous one. Initiatives to push for improvement in math and science began to
emerge. The study also discovered that when students graduated, they were not prepared to take
new jobs and become valuable assets to the work force. With these findings, the report ends with
a call addressed to the whole nation to come together in order to want to make a change for the
students who deserve a quality education. The nation and people needed to use all of the tools
they could, including paying quality teachers and treating education as an investment. A few specific areas were suggested which included setting higher expectations for students, restructuring school to have longer days and use time more efficiently, as well as to improve teacher preparation programs, partly by forcing them to pass competency exams (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7). In conclusion, the summary of this study is just simply the title of the report, the nation was at risk because the students were falling behind and being surpassed by many in other countries. Therefore, the nation was called upon to do anything necessary to reform the education system.

The second source that needs to be looked at is the “Costing-Out” Study, which was commissioned in 2006 and allows a look specifically into the education crisis happening in Pennsylvania. The premise of this study was that

The Pennsylvania Department of Education commissioned school finance experts Augenblick, Palaich and Associates to complete a report, known as the “Costing Out” Study, to assess the adequacy of resources available to the Commonwealth’s public school students and to determine whether those resources were distributed equitably across school districts. (Ward, 2014, p. 6)

In simplified terms, the study was supposed to determine if there were enough resources available in general in PA and then determine if they were distributed equally. The goal was to “determine the resources necessary to ensure universal student proficiency in reading and math as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law and to meet state academic standards in 12 subject areas” (Ward, 2014, p. 6). After the base cost was established as to how much it would
cost to educate an average student, a weight system was also developed in which student
differences and district-driven factors would be looked at to determine the cost of educating
different students who did not fit into the average category. The list of student differences
included the existence of poverty, limited English Proficiency, disabilities, and gifted and
talented ability, while the district-driven factors included, size, enrollment growth or decline, and
the cost of living (Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, Inc., 2007, p. 28). In this way, students
that needed a greater number of resources would receive a higher proportion of funds than those
who did not. The major finding was that “the ‘Costing Out’ Study determined that 94% of
Pennsylvania’s school districts did not have sufficient resources” (Ward, 2014, p. 6). If almost
every school district in the state did not have sufficient resources to provide a quality education
for their students, how were they receiving a substantial education? This finding makes one
question how great the discrepancy actually was between the different districts. In regards to per
student expenditures,

The study found that an average per-student expenditure of $11,926 was necessary to
meet adequacy targets, while the actual per-student expenditure at the time was only $9,
512, leaving a gap of more than $2,400 per student. In total, the state was underfunding
public schools by $4.38 billion. (Ward, 2014, p. 6)

Although the budget of the state is very tight, it seems unfair that education can be underfunded
by this large of an amount. Through this study, it was also determined that Philadelphia schools
were suffering even more, with the gap of per-pupil spending being $870 million less than its
adequacy target. The Philadelphia School District will be looked at a bit later, but for now it is
important to mention that the district is very large and lacks funding in many areas. What is even
more frightening is that this gap of per-pupil spending experienced in Philadelphia was ranked 20th in the state (Ward, 2014, p. 6). It is painful to imagine how much other districts are suffering after realizing the grim state Philadelphia is in. The bottom line is that,

The inequity of Pennsylvania’s system can be summarized by the conclusion that school districts with higher wealth and lower needs spend more than lower wealth districts- and do so while making lower tax effort. If additional revenues are needed to improve student performance, such funds should be collected at the state level and allocated by the state through a formula that is sensitive to the needs and wealth of school districts. By focusing on state funding in this way, Pennsylvania will be better able to reduce the inequalities caused by the current heavy reliance on local revenues. (Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, Inc, 2007, p. 37)

A greater responsibility needs to be put on the state. Pennsylvania, like the nation, needs to realize that they play an instrumental role in providing a quality education for students. Both levels are lacking in providing a quality education. In fact, after an analysis of 8 different indicators, which included examining spending patterns, as well as looking at varying approaches to “measure the distribution of funding across a state’s districts and, taken together, offer a broad-based view of equity in K-12 school funding,” the United States received a C last year as their performance grade in terms of school finance (Education Week, 2014, p. 1). Pennsylvania falls even further below this level. When looking at a grading scale that measures funding responsibility in education,
The National Report Card on School Funding Fairness gave Pennsylvania a D in funding equality, with the high poverty districts receiving 89% of the resources of low poverty districts. The consequence of low state funding is higher local property taxes to provide needed funds to the districts. (Ward, 2014, p. 5)

Clearly both the nation and the state need to be more invested in education in order for any big changes to happen. Now, a summary of the many problems that occur due to this lack of funding and support will be examined before going into detail about each one.

Although the state and nation have not done everything in their power to improve education, part of the problem the inequality stems from was that at the same time cuts were happening due to the Great Recession, other factors interfering with funding continued to take place. For example,

State education funding cuts have come at the same time as federal funding for preK-12 education declined and the local property tax base has been constrained by a slow recovery, falling property values, and the state tightening caps on annual increase in local school funding. (Ward, 2014, p. 2)

All of these factors added together do not produce a very likely successful budget and education system. In fact, when PA was looking at how to balance the budget and the cuts, they ended up cutting 20,000 jobs in public education, but even worse, this lack of money being spent by consumers hurt local economies (Ward, 2014, p. 2). Another problem that exists that affects education spending is the problem of corporate tax cuts.
At the same time that the commonwealth was reducing education spending, the state moved forward with several large corporate tax cuts, some of which continue to phase in even now. Since 2003, the value of Pennsylvania corporate tax cuts has more than tripled, and in 2013-2014 the tax breaks have a value equivalent to nearly one-third of the total prek-12 education budget. The state also failed to enact a severance tax on natural gas drilling. (Ward, 2014, p. 2)

These tax cuts are a fundamental problem for education funding. First and foremost, these large corporations are the businesses that make the most money in the country. Therefore, they should be paying their share of taxes in order to benefit the rest of state. If one looks at how much money could be raised based on these taxes, the education budget could be paid for very easily. Yet, such changes like this need to be made with the help of Congress, which turns into a Democrat-Republican debate. Regardless of how this change is going to happen, it needs to be soon. “Based on a survey of school districts, the Pennsylvania’s School Boards and School Business Officials declared that the ‘financial condition of Pennsylvania’s public schools declined from difficult in 2011-2012 to desperate for 2012-2013’” (Ward, 2014, p. 1). The longer that we wait to fix the problems, the longer it will take to fix them. Action needs to be taken now. When thinking about the cuts deepening and how we are preparing students for the future, think about this, “Among the specific findings for 2013-14: 47% of districts expected to raise class size. 30% reported that they planned to reduce elective course offerings; and 22% reported that they planned to reduce remediation programs” (Ward, 2014, 5). These are just a few of the examples to look at of how this lack of funding and resources affects students.
First and foremost, a look at the cutting of positions at schools needs to be addressed. When one thinks of education in general, an important central figure to never forget is the teacher. The teacher facilitates instruction and works day to day in the classroom with students to make sure they are learning and providing individual assistance when necessary. Due to the immense exposure and influence teachers have on student performance, it is important that districts hire effective teachers that do whatever it takes to help their students learn. The problem is, the district cannot hire new teachers when they are too busy cutting them, as well as other important staff members like nurses and guidance counselors.

For example, since 2011, the School District of Philadelphia has reduced its school counseling staff by over half, its central administration and support staff by nearly half, its school nurses by nearly a third, and its early childhood teachers by one fifth. (Ward, 2014, p. 1)

Another statistic from the School District of Philadelphia claims that since 2011, a large amount of staff have been cut, with the reduction rates at 16%, or 3,885 fewer employees; these cuts were made in the areas of early childhood teachers, nurses, and counselors (Ward, 2014, p. 3). How can schools cut essential personnel needed for student achievement? Nurses are needed in order to keep students healthy, and they are even more important in poorer areas because poverty is associated with health problems and lower achievement because many of the students are malnourished (Ward, 2014, p. 17). The cutting of guidance counselors is also a very important factor to examine. How are students supposed to go to someone to talk about what classes to take or where to apply for financial aid? If there are a limited number of counselors to guide, students can sometimes only see their guidance counselor once a school year. In fact, due to lack of
funding, the School District of Philadelphia had to cancel their high school fair, which is where students decide which high school they want to attend. Guidance counselors are even more essential for students who are in the inner city because a lot of times they are the first ones in their families to go to college. How are these students supposed to know what they have to do to succeed if they have no one to guide them?

Another overall problem is that although teacher effectiveness is a determination of student success, many districts, especially those in urban areas, cannot afford to pay these teachers. Therefore they do not attract them, and instead they must settle for those mediocre teachers that no one else wants. This is a problem within itself because the students in urban areas are the ones that need the most assistance and individual time with teachers. The budget of these schools needs to include more funding to hire quality teachers who are invested in providing students with a quality education.

Another important factor that needs to be discussed is the importance of early childhood education programs and how young children are not receiving intervention until many of them begin kindergarten. By that time, it is too late because they are already behind. I will refer back again to the example of Mercedez and Ari. Mercedez was behind before she even started school because her parents could not afford to send her to a preschool; they may not have even known about these opportunities because they could not read or write English. It has been proven that “The value to society of high quality early childhood programs is well documented” (Bryant, 2001, p. 12). The investments that are made into early education programs return to not only the individuals as they continue throughout school and life, but the investments also return to the economy because if an individual is more successful in school, her or she will be more likely to
attain a degree in higher education if given the opportunity. This means they will contribute more income to society because they will be earning a higher wage. These programs are essential to “children’s personal development and future success” (Bryant, 2001, p. 12). If anything, these programs should be what the nation is focusing on because the evidence is clear that they are effective. In fact, “Evaluations of well-run pre-kindergarten programs have found that children exposed to high-quality early education were less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades, or need special education, compared with similar children who did not have such exposure” (Bryant, 2001, p. 12). Even besides the fact that these programs allow for better academic success, the National Organization of Law Enforcement leaders claim that, “Early childhood education programs are among the most powerful weapons to prevent crime and violence” (Bryant, 2001, p. 12). If this statistic is not enough to demonstrate that improving these systems is worthwhile, then why not look at the fact that in 2009-10 only 26% of four year-olds nationwide were enrolled in early education programs because the federal government cut funds back so much (Bryant, 2001, 12). This problem is an easy one to fix. Money should be invested in these programs so students are not already doomed when they enter kindergarten. How is an education supposed to serve as a level playing field if essentially those underprivileged students are underdogs from the start?

Another result of educational cuts and the lack of insufficient funds is the growth in class sizes. Along with the proof of the benefits of early education programs, the benefits of small classes has also been proven. Reasons for this are quite obvious because the teacher has fewer students to monitor and keep focused. During individual work, the teacher has more time to spend with each individual student, compared to having 40 students in a class and maybe not
even getting to check in with every student at least once a day. Even as far as formative assessments go, if a teacher wants to make sure that every student in the class answers one question for the day, it is much easier to call on 22 students in a period compared to 32. By incorporating formative assessments, a teacher can also get a better sense of how the class is doing with the material rather than waiting until the test to see many students had a problem with a major concept. Teachers with large class sizes do not have time to communicate with every student. When looking at the short-term advantages of small class sizes, it has also been proven that lower class sizes result in lower dropout rates, higher grades, and better results on college entrance exams (Bryant, 2001, p. 13). When looking at the long-term advantages, “Strong field experiments and trial programs have confirmed that smaller class sizes in the early grades generate both immediate and long-term advantages in student outcomes and that these effects are greater for minority or impoverished students” (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 9). Also thought to come later in life is a higher income due to the continued academic achievement. Clearly smaller class sizes are advantageous for all learners and should continue to be a priority that districts work on implementing.

A common term that most parents, teachers, and anyone affiliated with the education world at all has heard is that with the new testing conducted by districts, teachers are forced to “teach to the test”. Whether this is true or not, there has been a loss of the well-rounded curriculum in recent years in schools. Many argue that there has been too much focus on reading and math and that curriculums are not paying enough attention to other subjects that are just as important; only the courses that have tests affiliated with them are being pushed. Many argue that a well-rounded curriculum is a necessity in order to foster student learning, as well as keep students
interested in school (Bryant, 2001, p. 14). If students can connect with something they learn and be interested in it, they will be more likely to work hard and strive to achieve. To give an idea of how important this issue is, some districts are even charging for basic academic courses such as foreign languages and non-core science and social studies classes (Bryant, 2001, p. 14). The call for a well-rounded curriculum is even more so now because of the globally connected world that we live in. Experts argue that students “need a 21st century education that includes classes in art, music, health and physical education, social studies, and vocational training” in order to prepare them for the workforce they will be in after graduation (Bryant, 2001, p. 14). This well-rounded curriculum needs to be included in school because it is essential for student achievement.

Similar to a well-rounded curriculum, districts also need to increase funds for special programs in schools that address developmental, academic, and non-academic needs (Bryant, 2001, p. 14). All students learn differently. They learn at different paces, and many of them need things presented in different ways in order to grasp them. Some students need things visually presented to them, while others are auditory learners. These students need accommodations and modifications that best address their learning needs. Districts also need to prioritize programs for two other groups including special education and English as a Second Language Learners. Students that have any sort of special education need, such as a physical or behavioral issue, need to have sufficient services so they can still achieve at as high of a level possible. Many times this means incorporating them into the least restrictive environment, which many times is an inclusion classroom. Many of these classes are co-taught, so there needs to be a regular education teacher and a special education teacher; this is obviously more expensive, so many districts simply do not have the correct personnel. It is imperative that students who need English
as a Second Language services get them so they can understand, read, and write English. The sooner this intervention occurs, the better off the student is. Not having sufficient programs for these learners is setting them up for failure because how can the student do well if he or she cannot understand the material he or she is learning? Schools have an obligation to help all of these students achieve, which requires them to have the correct personnel, resources, and knowledge to make this happen.

Another issue to be looked at as far as the non-academic programs that are being cut is the fact that districts are continuing to cut sports teams and after school clubs in order to make budget. This, like cutting the curriculum, becomes dangerous. For a student that does not really like school but continues to do well and stays in school because of his love for basketball, this should not be taken away from him. Some districts are also now doing a pay-to-play program for sports in which the family has to pay so much per child per sport. This can add up very quickly, especially when thinking about how much equipment costs for different sports that the students need to purchase on their own in order to play. This would be a burden for a middle class family with four children, yet think of the family that is trying to make ends meet and all their son is trying to do is get on the basketball team. Although there are exceptions so this rule, students may feel embarrassed asking for a waiver form and may just miss out on the opportunity altogether. Eliminating before and after school clubs is also not a good idea. Colleges continue to stress that they want to see involvement in school activities as well as the community. How are student supposed to be engaged if clubs continue to get cut because the district does not have the funding for the club to run or enough money to pay for a teacher to advise the club? Although these different programs may seem like extras, it is important to think about student
development. Many students really learn and grow from being involved in these different activities. They should be given the opportunity to achieve in them to help them also achieve academically.

The most important factor to look at when discussing the results of budget cuts deals with the discrepancy of per-pupil spending in different districts. As discussed previously, the students that need the greatest amount of funding, usually in urban areas, are the students that receive the least amount of funding, despite reforms that have been made that work on a weight system. When looking at why some students have a disadvantage, it can be seen that,

The achievements of disadvantaged students are more likely to suffer in response to inequalities in school funding for two reasons: those students are more likely to attend poorly funded schools, and they are more likely to be hurt by lack of academic resources when schools are underfunded. (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 11)

Also, the differences in per-pupil spending are actually sometimes greater within the state than when comparing two different states (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 2). This can relate back to the schools within a few miles of one another which I discussed above. Those schools reporting that they had low levels of funding are located in communities where poverty occurs at a higher rate (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 2). Although it seems fairly apparent when looking at these facts that this is a problem that needs to be fixed, these students continue to suffer from an inequality in funding.

Another important topic to tackle is that of standardized testing and the realization that urban districts cannot win with it, yet they still continue to drain their budget and give money to private
hands. Districts continue to give money to service providers and put public education dollars into private hands because they use federal and state funds in order to pay for private contractors that are supposed to help implement new federal and state policy mandates (Bryant, 2001, p. 15). Many of these service providers are test companies who continue to call for testing so they can collect student data in order to compare results from previous years to show districts their improvement. Yet, many students, particularly those in urban districts, cannot pass these standardized tests because they cannot afford the textbooks to teach the courses and the companies that write the textbooks also write the tests (Broussard, 2014, p. 1). These standardized tests are not based on general knowledge, but on specific knowledge, which is available in the textbooks created by the test makers (Broussard, 2014, p. 3). In the article titled, “Why Poor Schools Can’t Win at Standardized Testing,” Meredith Broussard discusses her findings after conducting research in the School District of Philadelphia regarding textbooks. She found that “The average school had only 27 percent of the books in the district’s recommended curriculum. At least 10 schools had no books at all,” according to the records for the districts she looked at (Broussard, 2014, p. 7). The students that did have books say some of them dated back to the 1980s. This is also a problem because “Books can be reused year to year, but only if the state standards haven’t changed—which they have every year for at least the past decade” (Broussard, 2014, p. 5). Therefore, how can a district afford to pay for all of these books, especially if this is an expense every year? The Philadelphia School District fought this year to even open its doors. Even when students do have textbooks, they often cannot take them home because the district does not want them to get lost. This also relates to the turnover rates for students in urban districts, where they are very high; this has to do in large by students being in
and out of foster care, as well as divorces where schools are quickly switched. To get an idea of how much of a budget the school district has for books, “Last year, Philadelphia schools were allotted $0 per student for textbooks” (Broussard, 2014, p. 12). This fact is striking, but more importantly, not fair. These students need to be able to have the resources in order to achieve on these tests. How can it be that society wants to break the cycle of poverty yet they cannot even provide textbooks to students? The solution Broussard gives is to

Stop giving standardized tests that are inextricably tied to specific sets of textbooks. At the very least, stop using test scores to evaluate teacher performance without providing such items each teacher needs to do his or her job. Most of all, avoid basing an entire education system on materials so costly that big, urban districts can’t afford to buy them. Until these things change, it will be impossible to raise standardized test scores—desire the best efforts of the teachers and students who will return to school this fall and find no new books waiting for them. (Broussard, 2014, p. 13)

Urban districts need to have a fighting chance. A situation like this is just setting them up for failure, which they have experienced enough of.

Another very important problem to address in regards to school funding is that the education budget is no longer only supporting one school system, but four, which creates another drain on the district to try and find money to subsidize these payments. “The commonwealth now supports four separate systems: private and sectarian schools, charter schools, and online ‘cyber charters,’ as well as public schools” (Ward, 2014, p. 2). The problem also is that before, the federal and state governments helped pay for these different schools. Now, the districts are
mostly on their own, paying out the money to a different school if that is where a student in the
district decides to attend. Expansion of these parallel systems has been hard on districts,
especially districts with high poverty populations such as Philadelphia. “By 2013-14, for
every example, payments for charters schools represented 30% of Philadelphia school district’s
operating budget” (Ward, 2014, p. 2). This is a lot of money for districts to have to give away.
These types of schools specifically hurt districts with high-poverty populations like Philadelphia.

For example, the 2012-13 budget failed to provide an increase in the basic education
subsidy for the state’s 500 school districts, allocating $40 million in new funding to 16
school districts. In contrast, that budget added $75 million in funding to public school
alternatives, doubling the size of those programs. (Ward, 2014, p. 12)

Cyber charter schools are also a drain on the budget of the school districts because even though
they don’t need to have an actual building or provide transportation, they still are funded based
on per-student expenditures from each student’s home district; this means it costs less to educate
them, but the district is still losing the same amount of money. This particular procedure is a
waste, and a 2012 audit of the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School estimated that “the
commonwealth could have saved $85 million in 2009-10 by reimbursing charters for actual per-
student charter expenditures” (Ward, 2014, p. 12). Therefore, cyber schools are overdrawn out
of the public school budgets, putting more of a burden on districts than is necessary. Another
problem with charter schools is that the public districts still have to educate a higher rate of
English language learners and students with severe disabilities (Ward, 2014, p. 12), so they need
more of the money to stay within the district than these other systems of schools. When looking
at how much it actually costs to keep up with the charter schools it has been found that,
The Boston Consulting Group estimated that each additional charter school student increased district costs by $7,000. When a student transfers from a district to a charter school, 50% of the fixed costs remain, leaving a net cost of $5,600 per student. In addition, approximately 30% of charter school enrollment comes from private or parochial schools rather than public schools, for which the district incurs an average cost of $10,400 per student for that first year. These costs affect the district’s ability to educate the remaining students. (Ward, 2014, p. 12)

Clearly these other three school systems cause a drain on the budgets of districts, and they need more assistance to help pay for them if they also want to provide a quality education to the students that still remain in the public school.

To provide a local example, the Allentown School District struggles and describes the funding of charter schools as bleeding out the district funding. The problem in a nutshell is that the Allentown School District is, like many other districts, losing thousands of students and millions of tuition dollars to charter schools; because of this burden forced upon them, they asked the state for a break. The Allentown School Board pleaded with the state Legislature to “reform the funding formula for charter and cyber schools” because of the immense amount of funds leaving the district (McEvoy, 2013, p. 1). In the past, the state “has offered partial reimbursement of charter costs for public school districts, but for the past three years, the cost has fallen completely on the districts and their taxpayers” (McEvoy, 2013, p. 1). Like funding shortages in every other district, Allentown struggles to figure out where to find this extra money. Allentown School Board member Scott Armstrong said, “We’re bleeding…I’m for charter schools. I’m pro-choice for charter schools. But you can’t bleed the public system in
order to facilitate charter schools” (McEvoy, 2013, p. 1). Armstrong brings up a common attitude felt among members in the education field: charter schools do have their advantages, but the students in the public school system cannot continue to suffer further because a large portion of the funds they are supposed to receive are going towards educating a select few. Additional funds are needed to fund these other three school systems. The responsibility to pay for the student’s tuition when they go to this charter school falls completely on the district. This is because when a pupil decides to attend a different school such as a charter school; the money that would have been spent on this student in the public school system must be sent to where that student is then enrolling. This is because the money is attached to the head of the student. As the number of students enrolled in cyber and charter schools continues to grow, this issue will continue to be a problem if state and federal governments do not step up to provide subsidies. To provide a glance at how many students we are looking at, as of November 2013, “2,166 students were enrolled in 19 cyber and charter schools, resulting in $19.6 million in tuition being diverted from the school district” (McEvoy, 2013, p. 1). This large sum of money was greatly missed by the students in the public school system, as resources became even scarcer. Armstrong brings up another good point when he claims that, “The sad fact is, especially for a distressed urban district like Allentown, we are being left with kids who are in the most trouble, who need the most help,” (McEvoy, 2013, p. 1). The students that remain in the public school system are the ones who need the most services, especially when referring to special education services because these are not guaranteed at charter schools. To continue reflecting on this issue, the parents of the students left are not “getting them out of the system and putting them into a charter school, and we’re left with less and less funds to educate the kids that need the most help” (McEvoy, 2013,
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p. 2). These students need help and legislation needs to be passed to take some of the burden off of the local school districts to come up with these funds. To provide an insightful statistic, “Over the past six years, the district has spent an estimated $81.3 million on charter schools, while the state reimbursed only $5.4 million, all of it coming between 2008 and 2011, according to district data” (McEvoy, 2013, p. 2). Federal and state governments need to bring back a system of reimbursement so the majority of students in the public school are not suffering even more, while a select few receive a better funded education.

Now a look at Pennsylvania again to see how funding has increased over time, then plummeted, putting school districts in even more dire conditions. Since the costing out study, some first steps towards progress were taken (Ward, 2014, p. 7). Governor Ed Rendell was elected in 2002 and made some changes that were very beneficial. He realized the need for an increase in funding to improve the Pennsylvania education system, so he increased funding by $750 million (Ward, 2014, p. 7). This increase was made available by an increase in state income tax from 2.89% to 3.07%, as well as an increase in the tobacco tax. Rendell also improved the overall health of Pennsylvania education by establishing Accountability Block Grants, which give money to improve specific areas of education such as Pre-K and Educational Assistance Tutoring Programs; these funds also provided state funding for new Head Start classrooms.

Rendell and his administration saw the problems that came from the Costing-Out Study and attempted to fix them by implementing some of the key programs previously discussed that were greatly needed. Also important was his development of a Charter School Reimbursement program, which was very helpful because it reimbursed a portion of the cost of charter schools to lessen the weight off of districts. Another accomplishment of Rendell and his administration was
“In 2008, based on the analysis of the costing-out study, the General Assembly adopted Act 114, which established a plan to meet funding adequacy targets distributed through a new funding formula” (Ward, 2014, p. 7). With this new initiative, they met this goal for the next three years, from 2008 to 2011, despite the Great Recession. Rendell did wonders and made changes for Pennsylvania’s education system, yet many students did not have time to reap the rewards of his policy changes due to the regression of progress that Tom Corbett brought into office with him.

When Tom Corbett took over as Governor in 2011, this marked a reversal in the funding policies of the state (Ward, 2014, p. 8). Claiming that cuts needed to be made to public schools and colleges, he ruled out any new taxes to help support education, saying they were not necessary. His first budget for Pennsylvania put Basic Education Funding back to the 2008-2009 figures of $5.2 billion, causing districts to scramble in order to come up with this extra money (Ward, 2014, p. 8). Although he claimed that all of the cuts he made to the education budget were necessary, that year the state ended with a surplus of $1.1 billion surplus, causing many to question his commitment to education (Ward, 2014, p. 8).

While Corbett was making cuts to the education budget, two different national budget cuts came at the same time. These included the funding cut to the Title 1 program for students in poverty, as well as cuts to the IDEA program, which provides assistance to students who receive special education services. Also at the same time, declining property values led to lower tax revenues, which also hurt school district’s budgets (Ward, 2014, p. 8). Another issue that plagued schools was that in 2011 the Republican controlled Congress made more changes that negatively affected the state in many ways. Beginning in 2010,
Funding cuts resulted in the loss of 20,000 jobs in the education sector between 2010-2012—the equivalents of 40 manufacturing plants closing in just two years. Pennsylvania fell from seventh in job creation in December 2010 to 48th in December 2013. (Ward, 2014, p. 10)

This was a terrible decision because people were not putting money into the economy to boost it back up. Another issue to address is the problem of Corbett’s logic when he made cuts to the regular education budget, but he made proposals to expand funding for alternatives to public schools (Ward, 2014, p. 10). Therefore, public school districts did not have the resources they needed in order to operate, but Corbett wanted more charter schools to open. Instead of just focusing on public schools and improving them, while maintaining the already built charter schools, he used public money to help fund private and sectarian schools, charter schools, and cyber schools (Ward, 2014, p. 11). Another problem under Corbett was that tax reductions continued, especially for corporate tax cuts. “Since 2003, the value of the corporate tax cuts has more than tripled, and, in 2013-14, the tax breaks have a value equivalent to nearly one-third of the total prek-12 education budget” (Ward, 2014, p. 13). The corporations should be paying what they need to in order to assist the education budget. School districts are beginning to take the questions of funding onto themselves because they cannot depend on the state. For example, the local government of Philadelphia has been stepping up in order to deal with the problem of educational funding, with measures such as increasing the tobacco tax and increasing the sales tax. Yet the question becomes, is it their responsibility to do this, or is it the fault of the federal and state governments for not providing the resources that are needed to educate the youth of the nation? (Ward, 2014, p. 13).
Governor Corbett’s reputation for education became very apparent after his $1 billion cut to education, which he is faulted with. When discussing the effects of Corbett’s decisions and budget, the Pennsylvania State Education Association claimed that,

Regardless of party affiliation or ideology, we can all agree on this: there was a time, the 2010-2011 school year to be exact, when Pennsylvania schools were funded at significantly higher levels than they are today. That’s where the agreement ends.

(Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1)

The PSEA blames Corbett for these cuts and the repercussions that came with them. Across PA there have been countless accounts of districts that have been forced to “increase class sizes, force students to pay for extracurricular activities, and cut academic programs” due to his statewide cuts to educational funding (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1).

The PSEA argues that the cut that occurred in the 2009-2010 school year was the problem because it was when “state funding for Basic Education was reduced and federal stimulus funds were used to make up the difference” but “since all of the federal stimulus that expired in 2011-2012 was one-time money that districts knew to spend on one-time expenses, their argument runs, when the stimulus funding ended in 2011 the state had no obligation to fill the gap” (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1). The problem was then handed over to the Corbett Administration, who had to decide if they were going to use state revenues in order to “maintain the Basic Education Funding formula, or allow the funding level to drop by hundreds of millions of dollars. They chose the latter,” leaving districts to figure the deficit out on their own (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1). On top of this, they also made other related cuts, such as ones for reimbursement for charter schools, as well as freezing
Special Education Funding. After learning that investing in education can prevent money spent on crime, it is interesting that after the stimulus expired for education was not replaced, “the Corbett Administration did choose to replace expiring stimulus funding from state revenues in the Department of Corrections and the Department of Public Welfare” (Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1). This is somewhat backward considering the fact that if this money was put into education, these other two would be lessened over the course of time because more students would have a quality education and then they would not be forced into these different institutions if they became contributing, educated members of society. PSEA addresses teachers in the article discussed above as it comes to a conclusion, stating that,

Next time you hear Tom Corbett say ‘it wasn’t me,’ just remember, it really was. He really did cut $1 billion from our schools. But you probably didn’t need budget documents and legislative language to know that. You live the cuts the everyday.

(Pennsylvania State Education Association, 2015, p. 1)

Although the rest of the nation may not be exposed to what is happening in the education system, teachers, students, and administrators feel these cuts every day and continually struggle to make ends meet, while also providing a quality education to students.

Although some money has been going back to education, the cuts are still being felt. In fact:

While overall prek-12 funding has increased modestly, state funding directed to the classroom still remains below its 2010-11 level. The 2011-12 budgets cut an average of $487 per student and modest increases in 2012-13 and 2013-14 added back $98 per
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student. The governor’s proposed budget for 2013-14 would add back an additional $126
per student leaving $263 per student, or 54% of the cuts intact. (Ward, 2014, p. 16)

Although change is happening slowly, the optimism of new Governor Wolf is offering some
hope to districts in Pennsylvania.

When examining Governor Tom Wolf’s Fiscal Year 2016 budget address, given March 3,
2015 to a joint session of the PA House and Senate, many in the education field hope that all his
ideas are implemented because these changes are fundamental to the health of education in the
state. Tom Wolf’s first budget proposal does a few things; most importantly it provides more
than $1 billion in new public education funding, but it also offers a property tax relief for
taxpayers, creating a win-win for poor districts. His “Fiscal Year 2016 spending plan increases
the state’s share of public education funding from 35 percent to 50 percent; a level not seen since
the 1970s” (Satullo, 2015, p. 1). Not only does the funding he is providing catch the weary eye of
those struggling in education, but his way of addressing the need for such funding gives hope to
many that his change is possible. Wolf states, “We are starting with education because, in many
ways, education is at the core of everything else that we want to achieve” (Satullo, 2015, p. 1).
Finally someone who realizes that if there are to be other improvements in the state, one needs to
first look at the future of that state and the education of the children. Also because of this new
budget, Lehigh Valley schools should see a $21.7 million increase in basic and public education,
which will be visible right in the valley (Satullo, 2015, p. 1). As far as the cyber charter school
system, a reform plan would set a “uniform regular education charter school tuition” rate, and
with this “the region’s schools would also see $6.6 million in cyber charter school savings”
(Satullo, 2015, p. 1). This uniform rate would cut back on the over expenditure on charter
schools that was looked at previously, and Easton Area School District Superintendent John Reinhart brings up a valid point when he states that Wolf’s “proposal to fund (cyber) charter schools with a maximum amount of $5,950 for a regular education student eliminates the opportunity for charters to make money off the backs of taxpayers” (Satullo, 2015, p. 1). But with these changes also come a question of where this money needs to be taken from. First, Wolf proposes to restore the $1 billion cut to education and school funding, as well as to increase it from that level, by enforcing a 5 percent natural gas extraction tax. Also, “the Budget proposal boosts the personal income tax from 3.07 percent to 3.7 and hikes the sales tax from 6 percent to 6.6 percent” (Satullo, 2015, p. 1). Although people may complain about these different cuts, they are definitely ones that need to be implemented. The money needs to come from somewhere.

The problem with his proposal is that he is going to have to get a Republican-dominated legislature to believe that his budget is what is best for the state, for present and future generations.

To provide an up-close perspective, some personal accounts from friends of mine that I have met while being involved within the Allentown School District follow. Meet Victoria Gaffney (V. Gaffney, personal communication, April 12, 2015). Victoria Gaffney has worked with the Center for Service and Social Justice Department all four of her years at DeSales. She began working as a volunteer for the Girl Scout Troop at Raub Middle School. She worked with the girls to earn many badges, organized field trips (which she could sponsor entirely through donations), and most importantly, has inspired many of the young girls she works with. She also began a “Big Buddies” program in order to help students develop 21st-century leadership skills. Through her work with the Allentown School District, she said, “I have met children without
beds, food to go home to, or families to support them. Not everyone is in this predicament, but mostly everyone was dealing with some type of emotional or material trouble.” She also has developed her own philosophy of how to best deal with the problem of poverty in the school district, as well as the nation, which coincides with the findings in this paper. In her words:

I think that the fastest way out of poverty is not to simply hand out money, but give children a solid education that will push them to get a good job and become an active leader in their communities. However, education is not just math, science, reading, etc. Education is also learning how to act in society, and what tools will help you foster those connections that in turn lead to better jobs.

Clearly, Victoria sees the call for education to be improved in these schools. She is invested in her students that she influences every day and wonders why the nation and state cannot do the same. (V. Gaffney, personal communication, April 12, 2015).

Now on to Shalynda VanDerVeer Morton who is an outreach worker at Francis D. Raub Middle School located within the Allentown School District (S. VanDerVeer Morton, personal communication, April 24, 2015). Shalynda describes her role as “an individual who helps connect the dots” in her community. As an outreach worker, she realizes the importance of stakeholders, residents, educators, law enforcement, and business owners to invest in the community. Her job involves engaging in the community and through her collaborative efforts, she helps individuals realize their issues and helps them to bring about positive change through community service and activism. She discusses her philosophy about the education system, which is also aligned with the thesis of this paper. She says that, “Many children in the community are not reading on grade level and are not performing up to par on standardized tests.
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I believe the school district, as well as the U.S. Department of Education has failed to realize that our children will not be successful in school until there is a paradigm shift.” Shalynda calls for there to be more opportunities for these students to have hands-on experiences to help them better connect to lessons and have a better grasp of the material. All of these students learn in different ways and need opportunities to display their knowledge. She says that “Once poverty, broken families, learning disabilities and unsafe communities come into play, it becomes virtually impossible for children to thrive in an education system.” This reflects a large amount of information already addressed in this essay about how these students need an opportunity to succeed. They need to have a quality education in order to give them an equal playing field.

These are not students that are far away, but rather students who live a few miles away. Shalynda makes a point to say that when people hear the world urban they are often have negative feelings toward the people living there, but she argues that we can learn a lot from the people living in urban areas. She describes them as resilient and resourceful. Shalynda ends her written personal account with a quote by Dr. Cornel West, a proponent of social justice. West said, “You can’t lead the people if you don’t love the people. You can’t save the people if you won’t serve the people.” In her context, Shalynda connects this quote to students across the nation that are living in urban areas that have fallen behind academically compared to their suburban counterparts.

“Much of society has made a direct correlation between the fact and (what they perceive as) the moral decline and apathy of the entire urban community.” She argues that if measures are not taken quickly, these students will not be able to become contributing members of society. (S. VanDerVeer Morton, personal communication, April 24, 2015).
Another individual who can shed light on the struggling students in the Allentown School District due to the lack of funding is Steven Liu (S. Liu, personal communication, April 17, 2015). Steven is the program director of El Sistema Lehigh Valley within the Allentown Symphony Association. He works directly with students at Roosevelt Elementary School every day to provide music lessons for students. Roosevelt Elementary School is identified as a community school by United Way to provide after school programming for youth and adults. This provides the various programs with snacks, facility usage, and even transportation if necessary. The students at Roosevelt are lucky to have access to these programs every day that are supported by the community, but there are 14 other elementary schools in the Allentown School District that are not designated as community schools, so they do not receive the same benefits. Steven, in particular, runs the El Sistema program which “seeks to transform the community at large by providing daily, after-school classes.” The instruments are included in the program, so the total cost is free to families. This is an essential piece of information because “given that 90% of the community are approximately identified as low income,” the families would not be able to afford the instruments or lessons. In fact, “In a school of approximately 750 students, the ASD provided music lessons only serve approximately 50 kids, because many of the families simply cannot afford a $10/month rental fee and the purchase of a music book every year.” There are approximately 115 students in the program, yet there is a waiting list of over 80 students who want to be involved. It breaks Steven’s heart that his program cannot fit these extra students with the resources he has right now, but he believes more funding needs to be provided so more elementary schools can have similar programs. He claims,
The programming provided by the community school model has consistently shows that students who are highly engaged in after-school programming perform better on their diagnostic test, statewide tests, and attendance in-school, and has been used to help transform the culture of the community as a whole.

To continue with Steven’s thoughts and observations, he says “there are a massive number of students and families who would like to participate in these programs, but simply cannot afford transportation to/from Roosevelt.” Families that want to get involved and give their children this opportunity cannot even do so because they cannot afford to send them. Many of the other schools in the district are struggling just to open their doors for school hours and cannot afford to keep them open after the day is done. Steven claims,

Many schools are struggling to increase access to additional programming because they realize how beneficial it is for the students to be engaged and excited about learning, but are also facing budget cuts that take away from anything that isn’t aligned with their core curriculum that is being tested on an annual basis. This is highlighted by the fact that ASD has merged the elementary resources for library, visual arts, music performance, and physical education into one department.

This means that students only receive 9 weeks of access to any of these resources. Steven argues that after school programs need to be implemented in the rest of the elementary schools to provide some of these same opportunities to children. He justifies himself by declaring that if music, or any other program, is used to engage students and help achieve the core curriculum goals, why can’t funding in these areas be a priority. (S. Liu, personal communication, April 17, 2015).
The final personal account is that of James Herrighty (James Herrighty, personal communication, April 20, 2015). Like Victoria, James has been a tutor and volunteer in the Allentown School District all four of his years at school. His greatest accomplishment he believes has been serving as the leader of an Urban Scouting unit for almost 2 years. Urban Scouting means that the troop is fully funded by the Local Boy Scout Council because they cannot afford it any other way. James has 14 boys registered, but only 6 show up regularly and go on trips that he plans. He says that about half the time they meet is spent talking on how the boys week has been since they last met, the other part is spent working on badges and looking at the Boy Scout curriculum. James says that “It is heartbreaking to hear some of their stories,” that the students come in with every week. An example he provided was: “They often tell stories of being removed from class for ‘misbehaving’ when all they were really trying to do was get the teacher’s attention because they do not understand what they are teaching.” Instead of the teacher coming over to try to explain something, they automatically assume they are misbehaving because that is what the stereotype is for most of the students. James tells an even more heartbreaking story:

“I have one boy who is in 7th grade and still cannot write full sentences. I keep asking his teachers who try and help him, but he does not receive the help he needs. He’ll frequently tell myself and other scout leaders that we are the only people in the school who care about him.”

James continues by telling me that he has been working with this student for almost a year, but an hour a week for 8 months will not suffice for how far behind he is. James, like the others who gave personal accounts, clearly sees the struggles these students face every day because they do
not have the proper funding and resources to be provided with a quality education. James concludes his account with a reflection, “It’s sad, but the school simply can’t afford to pay teachers extra to help students like him, so it comes down to volunteers like us.” (James Herrighty, personal communication, April 20, 2015).

After discussing the prominence of the lack of education funding across the nation and state, as well as the inequality of how these funds are distributed and the repercussions of these policies, it is now time to look at possible solutions. Through much research, it has been determined that the solution to the problem of the inequality in funding comes from fatally flawed school formulas, so the solution would be to change the funding formula to focus on the needs of individual students, then make a budget based off of this. The problem is that funds cannot just be given to districts and then tell the districts to spend it wisely. There is a need to look at how to re-engineer spending in order to produce better results for the money that is being spent (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 2). There is a need to put more of an emphasis on value. The priority should be to think about giving the students the best high-quality education possible, while also using all funds efficiently.

Fox and Solomon argue that there are 7 guidelines that policy-makers should use in shaping funding formulas they create. The first guideline is advocacy, which “requires that the basic elements of a quality teacher can be funded” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 2). The first look should be to see what tools student needs to achieve. The teacher is a key factor of student success, so focus should be put on hiring quality teachers. The problem with funding formulas now is that,
The conventional approach to building a funding formula takes a sampling of selected districts, calculates a weighted average of the per-pupil expenditure levels, and uses that number to establish the 'basic and guarantee amount' for each student. This is flawed for two key reasons. First, few states have expenditure data sets that are reliable or accurate down to the district and building level; and second, calculating student-expenditure levels without taking into consideration the educational context and student performance yields a result that has no relevance to the real world. (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 2)

Instead, what does matter is the type of student and how the money is spent, so instead “the formula should be built around a ‘factor cost accounting’ approach. Beginning with the student, determine the factors that must be present for that ‘student type’ to learn, provided of course that the student makes a reasonable effort to learn” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 3). For example, some factors that are universal include: students needing textbooks and materials; some differences occur in situations for at-risk students who need smaller class sizes and more tutoring programs.

The second guideline that should be included in funding formulas is the idea of equity. This component would be structured so that the money paid for a typical education is attached to follow the student instead of going to the district (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 3). The unit to which money should be distributed should then be the school and not the district because the district can distribute the money however they see fit. If the money goes to the school based on their students, this is the better option. There could be a district that has two middle schools and provides the same amount of funding for each, but one may be in an urban area while one is an a suburban area. Obviously this is not fair and needs to be changed. With this, students can choose
with their families where they want to go to school without using a voucher system, but they can still determine what would be the best fit for them.

Efficiency is also a guideline that should be incorporated into school funding formulas. This is best achieved through the use of market incentives and disincentives. “There must be a consequence for failure and a reward for success” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 4). This deals with the idea that if the money is given to the individual students and then they have to pay to go wherever they want, schools will become more competitive and it will become a market because they will be making improvements so students will want to attend their schools. The goal of this factor is to force schools to improve so students will want to attend them. If schools want money, the idea is that they will force themselves to improve to bring in students.

Performance, as well as stewardship, should also be focused on. Regarding performance, students need to be held to high expectations and focus their efforts. There should be incentives for when schools have high achievement, but there should also be consequences for schools that do not perform well. Schools that have high achievement should be given more freedom to make simple decisions on their own, but for schools that are struggling, they should have to follow strict policies. Stewardship needs to be part of the funding model because currently it is not and its inclusion is crucial. This new formula should force districts to have a fund where they set aside money in case simple things such as a roof leak occur; this is important for administrators who allows their buildings to become unsafe and hostile to learning because they do not take proper care of it. There needs to be a responsibility factor for school administrators.
Accountability and the importance of the tax efforts are the final guidelines that need to be incorporated. Accountability “requires reliable measurements of academic performance and accurate tracking of expenditures, program components, student demographics, and resource allocation” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 5). This means that districts need to be held accountable for how they decide to spend their budgets. They must also be held accountable for their allocation of resources, as well as how well their students are performing. The importance of the tax efforts is that “the funding formula should build the community’s tax effort into the distribution formula” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 6). The public needs to know that they are paying into a system that has a basic sense of “fairness and rationality” (Fox & Solomon, 1998, p. 6). Voters need to realize that they have an important responsibility in order to fund these schools and that educating the students of America has to be a community effort.

In conclusion, something needs to be done. For all of those ignorant enough to believe that the poverty cycle is going to improve on its own, I challenge them to think about themselves. Were they born into a family where they did not even know your father? Their mother was working multiple jobs in order to keep food on the table? They live in an area where they hear gunshots multiple times a day? The youth find safety in schools because it is a part of the day that they are safe. Young men are not being recruited for gangs and young women are not being seduced and taken advantage of by drug addicts and alcoholics. Although this may seem harsh and very stereotypical, these situations are everyday reality for many students; these same students that walk into schools with empty bellies and minds overflowing with distractions. Some students are even homeless. A school is where these students are supposed to be able to go to receive an education. It is time for the nation to provide one.
Although it may be easy to just turn to school districts and say they need to figure out how to make up the difference in budget because originally funding fell under the jurisdiction of the local governments because the federal and state Constitutions do not guarantee funding to schools, this is an unlikely fix. “School districts cannot raise property taxes high enough to replace these cuts with local funds. Pennsylvania’s students, particularly the most vulnerable, are paying the price for these decisions. However, there is still time to make a better choice and invest in our schools” (Ward, 2014, p. 19). Although it is going to be difficult, these changes can happen. There are many different ideas of how to come up with the money in order to fix the problem. Regarding the state of PA, one of the ideas is to enact a natural gas severance tax, especially because drilling is taking over different parts of the state. A second idea is to increase the state’s low personal income tax rate. PA’s 3.07% is the lowest income tax rate in the country on higher-income taxpayers (Ward, 2014, p. 20). An increase in the rate by 1% to 4.07% would produce in excess of $3.8 billion. To help reduce the impact of this increase on low-income families, the state’s Tax Forgiveness program could be expanded to provide more Pennsylvanians with targeted tax relief. (Ward, 2014, p. 20) This would easily provide money that is desperately needed to fund education, and because PA already has the lowest rate in the country, this seems like it could be done with little controversy. Two other ideas which will come with a little more controversy are adopting a higher tax rate for unearned income and instituting a graduated personal income tax (Ward, 2014, p. 21). Although these are all great ideas, it takes the agreement of Congress to make anything happen, and with the Republican domination present, increases in these taxes will not be likely.
This leads to the final portion of this thesis: the public needs to realize that education is an investment in the future of the country and in order for big changes to happen, collaboration and support are necessary. A new vision needs to be developed by the U.S. where they realize that everyone needs to be on board in order to make this change. They need to provide an equal opportunity for all students so they can become the citizens needed for a democratic government (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 12).

As a rule, U.S. citizens say they are committed to the welfare of children, the ideal of equal opportunity, and the notion that public education can and should provide a level playing field for all students. Given these stated values, why are they willing to tolerate unequal funding for public schools? (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 3)

The nation needs to focus on the students that need the most help.

There are also others in society who are ignorant and even argue that because these inner city students may not graduate in time or even need a high school diploma for anything, that they should not even worry about educating them; these ignorant individuals should begin to look at the overall poverty that hurts the nation and the depth of which it cuts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 4). When looking at how large of a problem poverty is,

Poverty drives achievement gaps, with research showing that income-based achievement gaps have grown over time. The gap between children from high-and-low-income families is 30-40% larger among children born in 2001 than among those born 25 years earlier. The research is also clear that those gaps exist even before schooling begins. (Ward, 2014, p. 17)
Greater investment is needed at all levels, but especially at the federal level because of the Common Core State Standards that need to be implemented, as well as the increase in child poverty that continues (Ward, 2014, p. 17). The Common Core will not serve as an opportunity for students to meet higher expectations and provide deeper support to students if they do not have the proper funding (Ward, 2014, p. 17). One of the reasons federal support does not currently happen is because they do not want to make any of the suburban families who vote for them angry with tax changes (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 9). These families should also take a look at Dewey's maxim which states that, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all its children;” maybe then individuals would think about their own children and realize the problem that is occurring and how they would feel if the tables were turned (Biddle & Berliner, 2002, p. 12). Ward calls for a solution from the state level as well. He claims, “Pennsylvania has tried austerity; damaging children’s prospects, furthering inequality, increasing local taxes, and slowing the economic recovery. What is needed is an investment in our children” (Ward, 2014, p. 3). To reinforce his call for reform he adds, “Such investments are directly related to state's’ overall economic health. Conversely, inadequate investments in education weaken the ability of a state to develop, grow and attract businesses that offer high-skilled, high-wage jobs” (Ward, 2014, p. 17). Local, state, and federal governments, as well as the general population need to help with the call to reform.

Children need to have a fighting chance to compete effectively in the new economy, a chance they have been denied. With a renewed investment in public schools our children, communities and economy will have a better chance to grow and thrive. (Ward, 2014, p. 21)

It is time for this change to begin.
Now, let us return back to the story of Mercedez and Ari. If both of these students are only in second grade and can see the injustice that exists, why can’t the rest of the United States?
References


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