

## **Diocesan Child Advocate Testifies on Inequitable Public Education Funding**

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I am The Rev. Debra J. Kissinger, missioner to children and child advocate of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem. I represent Bishop Paul Marshall and some 15,000 members of our church in northeastern PA, who are also citizens of our Commonwealth. Our Diocese includes 70 congregations in Northampton, Lehigh, Monroe, Berks, Carbon, Lebanon, Schuylkill, Luzerne, Wyoming, Lackawanna, Wayne, Susquehanna, Pike, and Bradford Counties.

We hope to share our views as citizens and provide a moral voice to the concerns regarding the funding of public education in our state. We want justice for all of God's children regardless of creed, race, economic or social status.

Members of our churches — teachers, parents, volunteers, grandparents, students — voiced their concerns about our public schools to Bishop Marshall. He learned that one of our members, a teacher, regularly buys pencils, crayons, and paper for her students in the Reading School District because funds are not provided. He learned from another member, a parent and volunteer, that children in one classroom in the Allentown School District do not even have matching textbooks. There are three different texts — each older than the other — for the same subject.

*The Diocese of Bethlehem is situated in a region that lives daily with the impact of the irresponsible funding system currently employed to support public education. Contrast the funding levels between Salisbury School District in Lehigh County with those of the Pleasant Valley School District in Monroe County. Salisbury's state subsidy combined with its local tax base affords its children an education worth \$10,574 per child per year. Pleasant Valley is only able to spend \$5,579 per student when it combines local taxing with its state subsidy.*

It is startling to look at the impact of this disparity. In Pleasant Valley, all elementary school students are in classes with more than 21 children. Research indicates that students perform best in their early school years in small classes of 17 or fewer. Most Salisbury elementary school students are in classes with fewer than 20 students. It is not possible to tell if their classes meet the 17 student threshold. We might assume they have the resources to make that standard a reality in most, if not all of their lower grades.

In the Salisbury elementary school there are 99 computers with Internet access for children to use. None of the four elementary schools in Pleasant Valley has more than one computer with Internet access for their children. Clearly, the children who enter middle school from Salisbury will be better prepared for the rigors of an education with high expectations and integration of technology. The Pleasant Valley children suffer from a system that fails to give every child equal access to a quality education.

House Resolution 42 that established this select committee speaks to the gross inequities that we force upon Pennsylvania's children.

It was suggested that I should share information about the readiness of senior citizens to support a school funding system that shifts reliance from property taxes to a statewide tax.

While I can not speak for all seniors, I can share what I have learned from them over the past several months as I have traveled through the Diocese of Bethlehem. Our seniors are deeply concerned about the education children receive.

They experience the current local property tax as a burden. Many own their homes and have low income with which to pay high property taxes.

They favor an increased State Income Tax as long as local property taxes go down. What came through most emphatically is our seniors resolve that children be provided with an education that will prepare them to excel even greater than previous generations to become the workforce of the future and to become great leaders for our country. Our seniors are proud of what they helped build and they want their grandchildren and great-grandchildren to achieve even more.

While the equity of our tax system on all sectors of society is important to consider, I believe the primary question ought to be whether the children in Salisbury are worth 100% more to our society than the children in Pleasant Valley. More broadly, whether the children in any community in our Commonwealth are worth more than children in any other community. Surely the answer is no. All are equal in the sight of God. Each is valuable. And all should be educated equally — not given a different worth depending on where they live.

One has to wonder why the state maintains a school funding system that conveys to most of our children and parents that, in this state, some children are valued more than others?

The proposal forwarded by Representative Micozzie is a win-win for children and seniors. Seniors in Pleasant Valley could find their property taxes cut by close to 50% while the district will gain \$23 million more for its students.

The losers are less obvious. Some would suggest that average wage earners, especially those in their early family-rearing years would be hardest hit by a new school funding system. It appears that the legislature is reluctant to act to effect the changes that we know are critical to building a system that provides every child a quality education.

Poll results from a recently released survey commissioned by Good Schools PA may fortify the will of the legislature.

- Nine of ten Pennsylvanian's believe that public schools should be funded more fairly and to do so would benefit everyone in the state.

- 98% strongly agree that all students should receive a high quality education regardless of where they live.

- 64% said yes when asked if the state income tax should be increased and local property taxes decreased to make school funding fairer.

- The crisis in public education is among Pennsylvanian's top three concerns. No difference can be discerned in the level of concern between terrorism, the economy and public education.

- Education outranked all other issues that *state leaders* need to address.

- Improving education is the most important issue facing the state for three in five Pennsylvanians who rated it as a ten on a ten point scale.

- 83% were well informed, demonstrating that they know that each local school district spends a different amount on children.

- 62% said they would more likely vote for a state legislator who voted to pass a law to increase funding for public schools.

The citizens of PA want the legislature to implement school funding reform. The consensus of the electorate recalls Thomas Jefferson who said, "Whenever our affairs go obviously wrong, the good sense of the people will interpose and set them to right." The will of the people of PA will continue to push the legislature to undue this injustice.

I am here today not simply to urge swift action on our school funding system. We must also attend to the disparities of educational opportunity regarding access to pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, small class size, access to up-to-date books and technology, safe and adequate facilities and well trained teachers who are able to use cutting edge, proven teaching methods to ensure that every child succeeds.

We are in the unacceptable position. With a few exceptions, only wealthy children in PA benefit from a school where all of these common-sense and research-proven practices are in place.

I urge the committee also to speak clearly in its findings about the need for a practical, fair and comprehensive accountability system.

Schools succeed because the entire staff works as a team, each member contributing to the outcome. The current micro-examination of teachers should be replaced with a system that ensures that every employee of a school is seen as part of the team that affects a student's success.

Likewise, we need to improve our system of measures that indicates student performance by also gauging improvement in attendance, graduation, promotion, along with test results such as those we collect in grades five, eight and eleven. We *cannot* discern a school's success by test scores alone.

Finally, our accountability system must reward schools that demonstrate progress, target resources to schools that show slow progress and take swift action to assess and restructure schools that show persistent failure.

The Diocese of Bethlehem is very serious about teaching its members and others in our communities about the need for comprehensive school reform. We now share and will continue to share information about the declining state commitment to public education. We will work to help people understand how to communicate with those who can change this situation.

We are part of a statewide effort known as *Good Schools PA* which, over the next year, will mobilize 10,000 citizens of faith and concern to bring visibility, urgency and support to the cause of public education.

We are active members of the *Pennsylvania Children's Advocacy Network*, *Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children* and the national movement to "Leave No Child Behind" sponsored by the *Children's Defense Fund*.

The Episcopal Church USA through the Episcopal Public Policy Network has called on all congregations to be involved in the improvement of public education.

In the Diocese of Bethlehem, we are following the call of our national church and of Jesus who said, "*If any of you put a stumbling block before (a child) who believes in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks. Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes.*" (Matthew 18:1-7).

Let us, in Pennsylvania, remove one stumbling block for our children. Let us provide a quality education that is adequately funded for every child in our state.

[This is an edited version of testimony delivered by The Rev. Debra Kissinger at a hearing on PA House Resolution 42, November 27, 2001.]