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Some Reality in Education Funding Debates Would Be Helpful

Recently the Governor visited the Clairton School District's elementary school to continue his push for a much greater level of education funding. He took the time to chide the Legislature for not allocating enough money to help districts such as Clairton. He is quoted as saying "I understand that you can't throw money at any problem, but you can't keep taking money out...and hope to get a good result." The Governor ought to be reminded that over the years, more and more money has been thrown at the problem with little or no improvement in academic achievement. Our *Policy Briefs* over the past few years have demonstrated this conclusion many times.

But one more demonstration is called for in view of the fact that the Governor is making the rounds of schools to make his case for more funding. And, since he was in Clairton to make his pitch, we will start there. Pennsylvania Department of Education Statistics (DoE) data for the 2004-2005 school year put Clairton City School District total revenue at \$12.82 million. Breaking that down by source, the District collected \$3.49 million locally (27 percent), \$8.04 million from the state (63 percent) and the remaining amount from Federal sources \$1.26 million (about ten percent).

Nearly a decade later, revenue data for the 2013-2014 school year (the latest available from the DoE), place total revenues at \$14.19 million, an increase of nearly eleven percent from 2004-2005. Again, breaking out the sources of the money shows that the local contribution was \$3.88 million (27 percent), the state pitched in \$9.63 million (68 percent) while the Fed's allocation fell to \$674,771 (4.75 percent). The state's allocation increased by nearly twenty percent, local funding increased over eleven percent, while Federal funding fell by nearly half. Clearly the money from the state and local taxpayers has been increasing, not falling, over time.

The following table shows how Clairton stacks up with other Pennsylvania districts that have similar enrollment levels for the period studied: Farrell, Wilkinsburg, and Windber.

District	Total Revenues (000s)			State Revenues (000s)		
	2004-05	2013-14	% Change	2004-05	2013-14	% Change
Clairton City SD	\$12,821	\$14,192	10.69	\$8,038	\$9,635	19.87
Farrell Area SD	\$13,700	\$15,623	14.04	\$8,213	\$10,188	24.05
Wilkinsburg SD	\$27,967	\$29,652	6.02	\$10,415	\$11,662	11.97
Windber Area SD	\$13,240	\$15,269	15.32	\$9,732	\$11,405	17.19

The table above shows that none of the districts experienced a decline in revenue over the decade, either from the state or in total. However, it does show that the percent increases in state revenue are much larger than boosts in overall revenue. Funding from Federal sources was cut for all but one of the districts (Windber rose 26.75 percent). Conversely, local funding rose for these four districts. Contrary to the Governor's statement above, money has not been taken out of these districts at either the total, state, or local level.

Of course changes in the amounts of revenue are only part of the story. It is also important to look at per pupil numbers. Clairton's enrollment in 2004-2005, (measured by average daily membership (ADM)) stood at 984. However, by the 2013-14 school year it had fallen by about seven percent to 917. Farrell's enrollment fell 21.4 percent to 836; Wilkinsburg was off 29.3 percent to 1,265 and Windber declined by 15.37 percent to 1,210. As we noted in an earlier *Policy Brief (Volume 15, Number 55)*, the hold harmless provision prevents state basic education funding from falling even if enrollment does drop.

These changes in ADM affect the per pupil revenue amounts received by each district. For the 2013-2014 academic year, Clairton's total revenue per ADM was \$15,478, a near 19 percent jump over the 2004-2005 levels. This per pupil amount exceeds Windber (\$12,621, up 36 percent) but is well below Wilkinsburg (\$23,437, up nearly 50 percent), and Farrell (\$18,695, up 45 percent). Again with state revenues continuing to increase, along with local allocations, combined with declines in enrollment kept per pupil revenues climbing.

But, what about the amount of money spent on education? The Governor and many educrats rarely, if ever, bring up the subject of district spending. The following table looks at the total spending of the four districts in our sample.

District	Total Expenditures (000s)			Total Expenditures per ADM		
	2004-05	2013-14	% Change	2004-05	2013-14	% Change
Clairton City SD	\$13,317	\$14,176	6.45	\$13,540	\$15,460	14.18
Farrell Area SD	\$13,378	\$15,463	15.59	\$12,570	\$18,503	47.20
Wilkinsburg SD	\$26,696	\$29,599	10.87	\$14,930	\$23,395	56.70
Windber Area SD	\$13,555	\$15,502	14.36	\$9,493	\$12,814	34.98

The table above shows that each district in this small sample had jumps in the amount of total expenditures over the ten year period. Clairton had the smallest rise while the largest went to Farrell. More importantly, when compared to the increases to total revenues, only Clairton and Windber had the growth to revenues outpace those of total expenditures.

Against the backdrop of enrollment, we get a better idea of how much is being spent on a per-pupil basis. As mentioned above, the ADM for these four districts in this sample fell, while for every district total expenditures climbed over the last ten years. Clairton's total expenditures per pupil came in at \$15,460 (a little below the per-pupil revenues). Clairton

total spending per student was about \$400 above the state average. The District also spends about \$1,600 more per pupil than the state average spending on instruction.

At \$12,814 in per pupil expenditures, Windber had the lowest cost of educating its students in the sample. The Windber number is well below Clairton (\$15,460), Farrell (\$18,500) and Wilkinsburg (\$23,395).

Clearly, the increase in education spending and revenues would not be as much of an issue if academic performance was stellar. As we have said time and again, throwing money at the problem does not guarantee good results.

The following table illustrates the performance of 11th grade students on the Keystone Exams and the attendance rate of the highs schools in each district.

11 th Grade Keystone Exams (2013-2014)		% Scoring Advanced or Proficient in...		Attendance (%)
District		Math	Reading	
Clairton City HS		35.00	43.00	88.64
Farrell Area HS/UMS		18.00	32.00	93.95
Wilkinsburg HS		5.00	6.00	82.17
Windber Area HS		76.00	81.00	94.17

The percent of students scoring advanced or proficient in math is poor in three of the districts but truly abysmal in Wilkinsburg where spending per student is the highest. Only Windber posted a respectable score and it has the lowest expenditures per pupil. The results are similar with the reading portion of the exam. Windber is the outlier in this sample. They have a fairly high level of academic achievement yet, on a per-student basis, they spend far less than Clairton, Farrell and Wilkinsburg.

The final indicator taken into consideration is the attendance rate for the respective high schools. It is no surprise that the district with the worst test scores also had the poorest attendance 82 percent —Wilkinsburg. We documented the relationship between attendance and academic performance in an earlier *Policy Brief (Volume 15, Number 30)*.

Clairton had an attendance rate below 90 percent while Windber's was over 94 percent. The seeming outlier is Farrell. However, Farrell's attendance rate also includes that of their upper middle school (UMS) which includes 7th and 8th graders. Middle school grades typically have better attendance rates than the high schools and it is very possible the overall rate is being lifted by these middle school grades.

In short, the Governor's call for huge increases in state education funding money is ill-conceived and specious. Data show that poorly performing districts receive and spend plenty of money, most of which comes from state taxpayers. Yet academic results are frequently simply abominable especially in districts getting per-pupil state funding in excess of the state average. There are several additional PA districts besides those discussed here—such as Pittsburgh—that also spend large sums for mediocre results.

Rather than blithely repeating claims that education spending is inadequate, the Governor should be concerned about how so much state money can be spent and yet produce so little in the way of academic achievement. Maybe he could even ask his so-called experts if they have an answer to that question. Obviously, if money were the answer, the problem would have been solved long ago. It would be instructive to spend some time studying districts such as Windber to see what they are doing to achieve good results with well below state average spending. As a start, the study might focus some attention on attendance rates that are so problematic at many of the failing schools.

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