

**Testimony of
Harold Grant
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Basic Education Funding Commission
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Good Morning. My name is Harold Grant. I am the Staff Representative and Parliamentarian for the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT400). The PFT400 represents about 3,000 teachers and support staff working in the Pittsburgh Public School District. On behalf of our members, I would like to thank the Commission for inviting the PFT400 to testify today in support of a fair funding formula for our schools.

The Pittsburgh School District has more than 25,000 children in 54 schools across the city. Our student population is 53 percent African-American, 34 percent white and 13 percent other races. Approximately 18 percent of our students are children with special needs and 71 percent of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.¹ In Pittsburgh, like most other large metropolitan areas, we have long had achievement gaps, along the lines of both race and socioeconomic status.

Of the 40 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Pittsburgh has the third-highest poverty rate for working-age African-Americans, ages 18-64. Nearly half, 45 percent, of all African-American children under the age of 18 live in households below the poverty line.² These disadvantaged children who have historically attended the most resource-deprived schools - schools with the fewest extracurricular activities such as art, music, and sports, the fewest AP classes, and the lowest graduation rates. Students of color growing up in poverty are the students hurt the most over the past decade by a toxic mix of defunding (through local, state and federal education budget cuts), school closures and policies aimed at privatizing public education.

Since 2000, the city has dropped from 93 schools to the current 54. While this was largely due to several decades of population decline that has now leveled off, the closing of 39 schools had a disproportionate impact on communities of color, with most of the lost schools in neighborhoods such as Hazelwood, the Hill District, Oakland and the North Side.

Back-to-back rounds of school closures displaced some students multiple times while creating entire “school deserts”—communities without a single public school.³

In addition to school closures, from 2011 to 2013, Pittsburgh students lost more than \$80 million in state funding. The state budget cuts immediately impacted our students, who lost art, music and world language classes as well as teachers, librarians, paraprofessionals, tutoring programs, textbooks, supplies, field trips, athletics and more. Students who were already struggling were hit again. For example, students receiving special education services in the general education environment were disproportionately affected by the loss of paraprofessionals and increased class sizes.

There have always been inequalities in education spending between the poorest and most-affluent communities across the country, but that gap has grown over the past 10 years. Now Pennsylvania’s equity gap is the worst in that nation. Pennsylvania spends about 34 percent more on students in the wealthiest districts despite the poorest districts needing more money to meet their higher needs. Pennsylvania’s equity gap is almost double the second-worst state in the country.⁴

Pennsylvania has the dishonor of being at the top of this list because it is one of three states without a fair funding formula – a formula based on the real cost of making sure students meet academic standards. Research shows that reducing funding inequality reduces the achievement gap. A 2011 Education Law Center study found that as state education funding increased by 40 percent from 2003 to 2010, test scores in the lowest-achieving districts increased by 50 percent. Conversely, as state funding was cut since 2011 the math and reading scores for the PSSAs have dropped.⁵

Research also shows that equity in school funding provides a lifetime boost to low-income students. A 20 percent increase in per student spending equals one more year of education. That extra year of education translates into a 25 percent earnings increase and a 20 percent poverty decrease.

In order to reduce the equity gap in spending between our poorest and wealthiest districts, Pennsylvania needs a fair funding formula that relies on accurate, reliable, verifiable, and current school and community data. The formula should direct more funding to districts and students with the greatest need by addressing student factors like poverty, English proficiency, and enrollment, as well as district factors like local tax effort, sparsity and the impact of charter schools. All districts should receive minimum funding increases while the

new formula is being implemented. The PFT 400 supports the fair funding formula proposed by The Campaign for Fair Education Funding and the coalition's recommendations for greater efficiencies and strong accountability.⁶

While Pennsylvania needs a funding formula that distributes money equitably between our schools, a formula won't mean anything without adequate or sufficient money to invest in our schools. The state legislature must restore the devastating cuts from the past few years and invest more in the education of our children that need it the most – especially children that require special education and mental health services. Today's students are the future of Pennsylvania. To ensure that they become successful, productive adults, every school must have the resources they need to deliver a great education to each and every one of our children regardless of where they live.

¹ <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/domain/17>

² <http://www.post-gazette.com/business/biz-opinion/2013/05/05/regional-insights-minorities-getting-left-behind-here/201305050154>

³ http://www.gpspgh.com/storage/documents/gps_comm-based_plan_revised_final.pdf

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/03/12/in-23-states-richer-school-districts-get-more-local-funding-than-poorer-districts/>

⁵ <http://thirdandstate.org/2015/april/senate-appropriations-committee-part-i-education-budget-preview>

⁶ <http://fairfundingpa.org/news/cfef-proposes-funding-system>