

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council
Committee of the Whole
by Donna Cooper, Executive Director
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I know that each member of City Council cares deeply about our schools. In large part, that's why you paved the way for the creation of a local school board.

Yet from the outside looking in, it appears that you are slow walking the funds for the school district in spite of finally getting the district back. Last week, at the District's budget hearing, some members of Council challenged the district's need for the tax increase because the district won't be in the red till 2020.

If you think that gives you pass, please think again.

The district's projected fund balance covers only 7.5 days of operation for next year. That's a very thin margin for a nearly \$3 billion enterprise that serves more than 200,000 children.

This district is still teetering on the edge of crisis and it needs your support now.

I heard members of Council suggest that they won't vote for the tax increase until the state ups its share of funding. All of us share your indignation. But, it's crystal clear that Harrisburg isn't going to pony up what's needed.

The Speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives publicly boasts that the State Constitution doesn't guarantee every child a right to an education. If that



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doesn't convince you that there is no manna coming from Harrisburg, what will? You must act for our kids, they won't.

As much as you've done, and you've done a lot, the district is about a billion dollars short of what is needed. Of that amount, about \$250 million should be coming from local taxpayers. Adopting the plan proposed by the Mayor will gradually get where us to we should be over the next five years. That's too long from my vantage point, but at least it moves us in the right direction.

The new tax assessments make this hard for some. But you know the truth about AVI. It is the right policy due to years of under-valued assessments in far too many - relatively affluent neighborhoods. Those same homeowners might change their tune if Council acted to decrease the number of tax delinquents who shirk their responsibility with impunity.

Likewise, walk back the tax abatements that shield the top 1% from taxes while the 99% of us must pay our full bill.

My point is, don't forgo your obligation to fund our school district because of the ire over new assessments.

Instead, pass bills that address these problems and expand the homestead exemption to show homeowners you are serious about making everyone pay their fair share.

Weeks of reporting on the horrific conditions in the schools have parents paralyzed with fear. Follow these suggestions and show those parents you are acting on their behalf. Only by funding the schools can you make the case you are doing something about it.

The District is doing their part with their meager resources. More children are entering 4th grade with strong reading skills. Only two other large districts in the country can make that claim. Our graduation rate has increased every year for the last seven years. These facts are proof positive that the additional funds you've put on the table are producing tangible gains.

You asked for the local control, now it's in your lap. Don't cross your legs and let the District fall into further disrepair and a renewed era of dysfunction.

PCCY urges you to adopt a revenue package that closes the District's local funding gap through 2023. In doing so you will be making our schools buildings safer, supporting our teachers, and help our kids achieve.

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