



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Public Education

Policy Positions

We believe that the whole of society is strengthened as its members participate in and contribute to the common good. True and constructive participation is made possible by the availability of comprehensive, fair, and effective education that provides (1) opportunities for gainful employment that enables citizens to support themselves and their families, and (2) adequate understanding of citizen responsibilities as members of communities and our society as a whole. This understanding of the role of public education leads the Council to the following positions:

- Society has a responsibility to provide comprehensive, fair, adequate and cost effective public education opportunities for all children and youth.
- Government has a responsibility to address past injustices in our public education system, rooting out patterns of discrimination that impact the ability of specific populations to receive fair and adequate quality education.
- Government has a responsibility to enact fair, progressive tax structures that provide for fair and adequate funding for all students and schools.
- Government should set ambitious but reachable standards for students and schools, and should provide resources and tools to help in meeting the standards.

Background

Laura Sadler Olin, Executive Director of the Lancaster Foundation for Educational Enrichment, says:

The health and strength of our nation depends on the ability of its citizens to understand issues and to treat each other with respect. The single entity that is broad and deep enough to assure that ability is our public schools.

Children must have every opportunity to develop the skills, both academic and personal, that will ensure a prosperous, equitable, and free society.

As Christians we believe that God desires for children the life abundant which comes from the fullest development of their gifts — physical, intellectual, social and spiritual.

—1991, United Church of Christ
General Synod XVIII Pronouncement,
"Support of Quality, Integrated
Education for All Children in Public
Schools"

Most Pennsylvanians would agree that effective public schools are vital for the success of communities and individuals. They help to prepare young persons to become successful citizens, life-long learners and productive, taxpaying workers. They are needed for economic development to draw more employers to Pennsylvania by providing a well-prepared workforce. An effective workforce employed in well-paying jobs generates more tax dollars that help to support important public needs like roads, bridges and other infrastructures, libraries, parks, and other amenities, and many other goods and services that we consider important to support a just society that provides for the needs of all. The consequences of inadequate public education present both financial and environmental costs to society—higher crimes and incarceration rates, unemployment, greater need for public assistance, and poorer health due to poor diet, substandard living conditions and lack of health insurance—and these costs are passed on to other citizens in the form of higher taxes and health care premiums and costs. Because the quality of our education system affects so many aspects of life in this Commonwealth, everyone—families, employers, homeowners, and the elderly, not to mention our children—has a stake in ensuring the effectiveness of our public schools.

Pennsylvania's public education system has failed on many levels, and much of the failure can be attributed to inequities and insufficiencies in the Commonwealth's school funding system. Good Schools Pennsylvania has identified a number of problems with the current funding system¹:

- The current funding system fails...
 - on generally accepted principles of equity, adequacy, efficiency, accountability and predictability.
 - because there is no connection between the allocation of state funds and the actual costs associated with educating students to meet standards, especially students in poverty, with disabilities, learning English, or in growing districts.
 - because Pennsylvania distributes its school aid in a haphazard, jerrybuilt fashion that bears little relationship to the real needs of children in a district or the capacity of the district to raise funds itself.
 - Because of inadequate state funding support for local districts. On average, states contribute about half of what it costs to educate their children. Pennsylvania contributes just slightly more than a third.
- As a result, Pennsylvania has a public education funding system that is excessively dependent upon local wealth—primarily local property taxes—that accounts for 44 percent of the revenues to support Pennsylvania's public education system, as compared to the national average of 29 percent.
- The current system fails because some communities are taxing themselves at four times the rate of other communities, yet still unable because of low community wealth to raise adequate funds to support their schools. Consequently, in Pennsylvania, some students are supported by as much as \$17,000 per year, and some in other districts by as little as \$6,000 per year.

Educators and policymakers understand what schools need in order to be successful, but have failed to take responsibility for providing the resources and tools to achieve success. Good Schools Pennsylvania has identified some of the needs²:

- Successful schools...
 - start with high expectations, measured by rigorous standards for all students.
 - have qualified teachers and administrators, a curriculum designed to meet the agreed upon standards, enough up-to-date books, computers and other teaching resources for all students, safe facilities, appropriate class sizes, early childhood education, and resources for at-risk families.
 - have appropriate assessments of student learning.
 - are accountable for wise use of resources and demonstrating student success/improvement.
 - have adequate financial resources to support all these needs.

Local districts alone cannot address the needs of students. The governor and General Assembly have a constitutional responsibility and authority to ensure effective and sufficient school funding based on the principles of equity, adequacy, efficiency, accountability and predictability. Other states have already led the way, which means that potential models already exist to make the task easier.

Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

A statement on public education from the United Church of Christ says:

As we think about whether American society embodies Jesus' teaching that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to be concerned about public schools, the primary institution where we have agreed to nurture and shape God's precious children.³

¹ Good Schools Pennsylvania, "Core Messages, Education Finance Reform Campaign."

² *Ibid.*

³ <http://www.ucc.org/justice/issues/public-education/>

Public education has long been a concern for Christians from many standpoints, including economic security, responsible stewardship of God's gifts, wholeness, and nurture, to name a few. Here are two representative statements from the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

From the Presbyterians:

...a responsible stewardship of God's gifts to all persons requires the provision of concern, attention, skills, and talents as well as material resources necessary to education of high quality for children and youth in our society.

Presbyterians see support of education as a calling, characterized by these words:

As God's people we are enjoined in Scripture to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give care to the imprisoned. In our time, the needs of children and youth for new services that will provide wholeness in their education, growth, and development are especially evident. They are needs of life-giving or life-denying proportions.⁴

From the Lutherans:

Vocation involves God's saving call to us in baptism and life lived in joyful response to this call. In Jesus Christ we are loved by a gracious God who frees us to love our neighbor and promote the common good; in gratitude for God's love, we live out our vocation in our places of responsibility in daily life—home, congregation, work place, neighborhood, nation, and global society.

Education belongs to our baptismal vocation. Our particular calling in education is two-fold: to educate people in the Christian faith for their vocation and to strive with others to ensure that all have access to high quality education that develops personal gifts and abilities and serves the common good. This calling embraces all people in both Church and society.⁵

Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness for the United Church of Christ, in her 2008 "Message on Public Education," said that the UCC has interpreted Jesus' words in Matthew 25 ("Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...") to be about "the community's responsibility for guaranteeing basic human needs." Basic needs in our own time include many things that were not anticipated in the society of Jesus' time, including full employment, decent wages, access to affordable housing and other things that make it possible to survive in today's society. Public education is essential to equip persons with the necessary tools that help them to access those basic needs.

The Council's ***Principles for Public Advocacy*** (10/05) says:

The whole of society is strengthened as its members participate in and contribute to the common good. We affirm the need to eliminate poverty for it destroys and degrades human lives. All people should be educated and empowered, to the extent possible, so that they can enjoy the benefits of economic opportunity. It is the Commonwealth's responsibility to provide a thorough and efficient education to every child. The failure of a society to provide adequate educational opportunities for children and youth and opportunities for gainful employment condemns some people to poverty and weakens the fabric of community life. When people have no hope for a better future, crime increases and society suffers.

⁴ PC(USA) 1987 Statement on Public Education, [http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/chapter00000.htm?fn=default.htm\\$fn=templates\\$vid=default\\$3.0](http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/chapter00000.htm?fn=default.htm$fn=templates$vid=default$3.0)

⁵ "Our Calling in Education," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/education/pdf/Our_Calling_in_Education_Web_Version.pdf, p. 1.