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# Assessing the School District of Philadelphia

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John Schatz  
May 4, 2015  
Assessing the School District of Philadelphia

The education system in Philadelphia is a failed system. One of the tools to quantify the failure is the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test results. Other measurements, such as SAT scores and graduation rates, also indicate that the education system is failing. After examining the results of these quantifying processes, the historical relationships that the School District has with various levels of government, and the mismanagement of resources in the district, it becomes clear that one of the major issues harming the quality of education in Philadelphia is the lack of funding.

Grade 11 Math Data		
Year	This School %	SDP Average %
2005-2006	1.1	26.9
2006-2007	7.6	31
2007-2008	11.9	32.6
2008-2009	3.7	31.6
2009-2010	15.3	36.3
2010-2011	7.2	38.2
2011-2012	4.6	37.5

Grade 11 Math Data		
Year	This School %	SDP Average %
2005-2006	96.1	26.9
2006-2007	97.2	31
2007-2008	98.2	32.6
2008-2009	98.1	31.6
2009-2010	97.8	36.3
2010-2011	98.4	38.2
2011-2012	97.1	37.5

The PSSA test results have clear correlations with a student's race and economic position. African American students test much lower than Caucasian students, with a 10 percentage point difference in math proficiency in every grade. In the 2011-2012 school year, 54.5 percent of Caucasian students were categorized as proficient or advanced in reading. In the same year, with the same test, only 36.3 percent of African American students were categorized as such. The science assessment resulted in 51.1 percent of Caucasian students

being considered proficient or advanced, while only 23 percent of African American students achieved this categorization. If a student is economically disadvantaged, there is a 75 percent

chance that he or she will be at the basic or below basic levels of proficiency in math by junior year in high school.<sup>1</sup>

In that same school year, Philadelphia had fourth worst PSSA score in math. Duquesne School District in Allegheny County had 50.2 percent of its students test below basic in math. Chester-Upland School District in Delaware County had 44.1 percent of its students result in below basic proficiency in math. In Dauphin County, Harrisburg City School District had 38.4 percent of its students test below basic in math. The School District of Philadelphia had 29.9 percent of its students test below basic in math. However, Duquesne, Chester-Upland, and Harrisburg City only had 247, 1,490, and 2,822 students, respectively. The School District of Philadelphia had 70,200 students that school year.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Philadelphia had the eighth highest percentage of students test below basic in reading and science.

Using the PSSA as a gauge to measure the quality of education at a school can be problematic. The school administers the PSSA itself, so there could be issues with cheating. Philadelphia Electrical and Technical Charter High School and Imhotep Charter High School were both investigated for cheating.<sup>3</sup> These incidents caused the Department of Education to forbid Philadelphia teachers from administering the PSSA to their own students. At the

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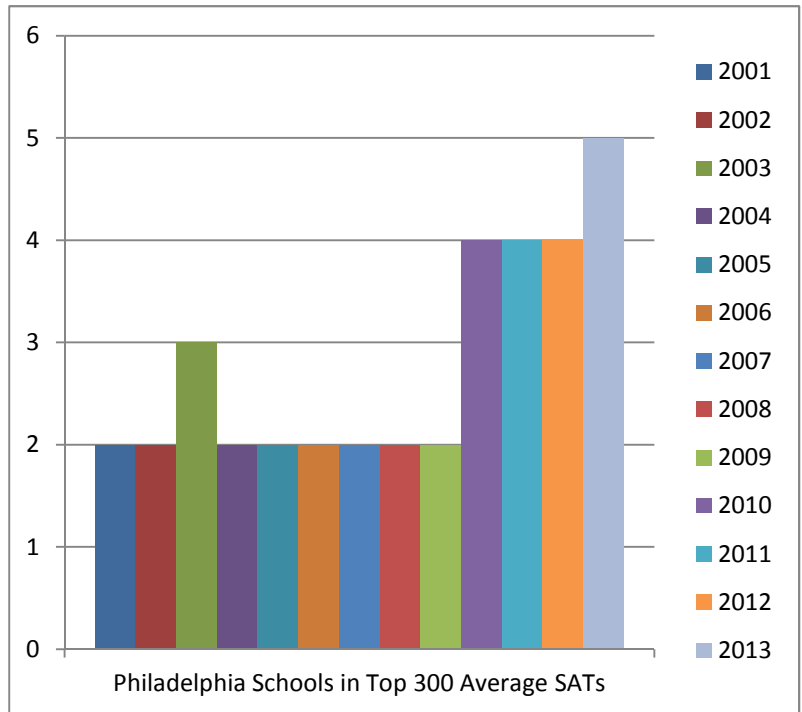
<sup>1</sup> “2011-2012 PSSA and AYP Results, 2011-12 State Level Math, Reading, Science and Writing Results,” Pennsylvania Department of Education, [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school\\_assessments/7442](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442)

<sup>2</sup> “2011-2012 PSSA and AYP Results, 2011-12 State Level Math, Reading, Science and Writing Results,” Pennsylvania Department of Education, [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school\\_assessments/7442](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442)

<sup>3</sup> Dale Mezzacappa, “State prohibits Philly teachers from administering PSSA to their own students”, *The Notebook*, Feb. 28, 2012 <http://thenotebook.org/blog/124560/new-rule-teachers-cannot-administer-pssa-tests-their-own-students>; There is also an article about the confessions of a cheating teacher: Benjamin Harold, “Confession of a cheating teacher”, *The Notebook*, July 28, 2011, <http://thenotebook.org/blog/113913/confession-cheating-teacher>

conclusion of the PSSA process for the 2011-2012 school year, 56 schools in Philadelphia were being investigated for cheating.<sup>4</sup> Most of the schools were those that performed the most poorly.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is another test that can be used to gauge the quality of education a school provides. The School District of Philadelphia does poorly in this test as well as the PSSA. In 2013, 629 schools administered the test. Out of the top 400 schools, only seven of them were located in the School District of Philadelphia. Additionally, over 25



schools in the school district had an average score of 1010 or lower.<sup>5</sup> The maximum possible score on the SAT is a 2400. Students receive 600 points by merely signing their name on each of the three sections, math, verbal, and written. From 2001 to 2013, the highest number of high schools that were in the top 300 average SAT scores was five in 2013. For seven of those years, only Central High School of Philadelphia and Julia R. Masterman High School achieved this ranking. Therefore, other than these two, only three other schools are in the top

<sup>4</sup> “Key to the 2012 PSSA Data” *The Notebook*, <http://thenotebook.org/sites/default/files/pssa-scores-table.jpg>

<sup>5</sup> “SAT and ACT Scores, Public School SAT”, Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2001-2013 Scores [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state\\_assessment\\_system/20965/sat\\_and\\_act\\_scores/1339721](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_assessment_system/20965/sat_and_act_scores/1339721)

300 in any given year. Most of the high schools in the School District of Philadelphia are actually located toward the bottom of the rankings.

The graduation rate is another indicator of the quality of education. The graduation rates of high school students in the school district of Philadelphia paint a grim picture. In 2005, the dropout rate of high school students was 43 percent. This number decreased to 36 percent in 2010 and 64 percent of the students were graduating within four years by 2012.<sup>6</sup> While these numbers seem to be promising, the fact remains that over 30 percent of students are still dropping out of public high schools annually. By failing to take care of the students and attempting to increase the graduation rates of these schools, the failed education system of the School District of Philadelphia worsens. Students who receive high school diplomas have higher employment rates than those who pass the General Education Development tests. Individuals without diplomas have also been found to depend on welfare and government assistance to greater degrees than people with high school diplomas.<sup>7</sup> In Philadelphia, nearly 20 percent of the population has not received a high school diploma. This portion of the population is disproportionately represented in the group of Philadelphians living in poverty. Those who have not graduated from high school make up almost 40 percent of people living in poverty. Furthermore, 38 percent of the jobs in Philadelphia require a high school education or less, which means that 62 percent of the jobs require some degree of college education. However, 53 percent of the population does not meet this requirement, which

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<sup>6</sup> “Philadelphia 2013: The State of the City,” PEW Charitable Trusts, [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia\\_Research\\_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf) Pg. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel J. Losen, “Graduation Rate Accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Disparate Impact on Students of Color”, Ed. Gary Orfield, “Dropouts in America” Harvard Education Press 2006, Pg. 41.

results in an increase in the utilization of government assistance programs.<sup>8</sup> Other than increasing employment, there are many other benefits to improving the quality of education. In areas with higher quality of education, citizens are less likely to commit serious crimes and place high demands on the public health care system as well.

Nationally, the federal government has placed very rigid restrictions on what it can do in terms of interfering with the public education systems in the 50 states. President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration commissioned a report to summarize the state of education in the country. James Samuel Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, released in 1966, detailing the importance of socioeconomic status in student achievement. Johnson's administration also passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which created the Department of Education and creates a means of funding state educational agencies that in turn fund local educational agencies. The local educational agencies distribute the funding to public schools. During his second term, President Ronald Reagan took the opposite view of Johnson regarding the Department of Education and tried to shut it down. While he was unsuccessful, Reagan did cause the department to have its staff significantly reduced, its budget cut, and its regulatory authority diminished.<sup>9</sup> The next major step in education reform came from the administration of President George W. Bush. The law was titled No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The law was designed to increase the accountability of educational institutions that benefit from federal funding. Schools, under NCLB, not only had to report assessments of their student body as a whole to the federal government, but assessments of

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<sup>8</sup> Mayor Nutter's Office, *Shared Prosperity Philadelphia: Our plan to fight poverty*, City of Philadelphia: Mayor's Office, January 2014, <http://sharedprosperityphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/SharedProsperityPhilaPlan-2013.pdf> Pgs. 14 and 29.

<sup>9</sup> McGuinn, Patrick J., "No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005" University Press of Kansas: Lawrence, Kansas, 2006, pg. 45

certain groups of students. Reports needed to break down students by socioeconomic characteristics. Subgroups included, “economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students.”<sup>10</sup> The education policies regarding accountability have not changed on the federal level since NCLB was passed. It has resulted in teaching to the test in order to get more funding.

The history of the relationship between the School District of Philadelphia and the state government is complicated. In 1998, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a law that targeted Philadelphia and allowed for the state to create the School Reform Commission (SRC) in Philadelphia.<sup>11</sup> The SRC started running the school district in 2001 and has radically changed the way the city government can run the school district, as much of the power is no longer localized.

When it comes to the amount of funding students in the School District of Philadelphia has, the situation is even more troubling than the school district’s PSSA and SAT scores. In 2009, there were 159,867 in the School District of Philadelphia. In the Lower Merion School District, in a neighboring county, there were 6,782 students. Students in Lower Merion benefitted from \$21,110 of spending per student, while Philadelphia only spent \$10,828 per student.<sup>12</sup> Rather than trying to fix the system, it seems that the state government has abandoned a failing education system, and parents and students along with it, to become worse off. Former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett decreased the amount

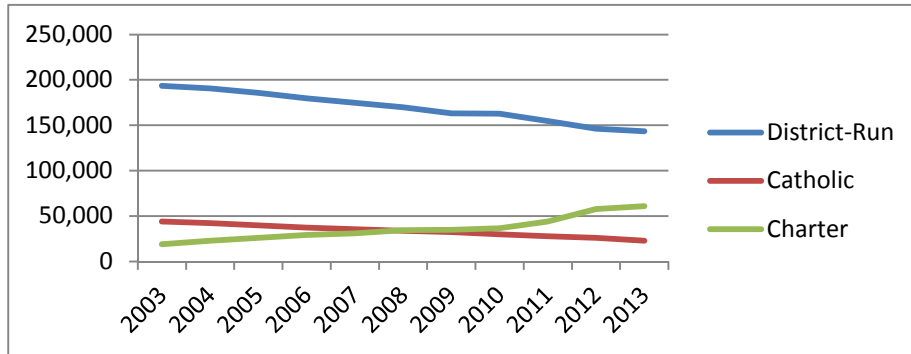
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<sup>10</sup> Wong, Kenneth K., “Politics and Governance: Evolving Systems of School Accountability,” *Educational Policy* 27.2 (March/April 2013) Pg. 413.

<sup>11</sup> Maranto, Robert, “A Tale of Two Cities: School Privatization in Philadelphia and Chester,” *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 111.2 (02/2005) Pg. 164

<sup>12</sup> Richard Lee Colvin, “The Federal Education Budget Project,” New American Foundation <http://febp.newamerica.net/>

of funding from the state government and went as far as to freeze assets at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. This action caused thousands of layoffs and the cutting of



programs. The School District laid off 3,783 employees during June of 2013.<sup>13</sup>

Moving down from the state level, the

School District of Philadelphia and its students have been abandoned locally as well. Charter schools, private schools, and cyber schools have all seen increases in enrollment. To be clear, charter schools are run by a Board of Trustees and an independent administrative staff despite being semi-public. Cyber schools are online educational programs that students engage in from home. The traditional schools in the School District of Philadelphia experienced a decrease in enrollment from 185,671 in 2005 to 143,210 in 2013. At the same time, enrollment in charter schools has jumped from 26,046 to 60,695.<sup>14</sup> These numbers equate to a decrease of 42,461 for the traditional public school system and an increase of 36,649 for the charter system. Charter schools have grown in number from 25 in 2000 to 86 in 2013. The charter system is also draining resources from the traditional public school system, as opposed to merely students. In 2010, 13 percent of the state’s expenditures for public education went to charter schools. The SRC has five members, three of which are

<sup>13</sup> Mezzacappa, Dale “District lays off more than 3,700 employees” *The Notebook*, June 07, 2013; Mezzacappa, Dale, “270 more layoff notices to go out this week” *The Notebook*, June 05, 2012

<sup>14</sup> PEW Charitable Trusts, “Philadelphia 2013: The State of the City” [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia\\_Research\\_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf) Pg. 29



appointed by the governor and one of which are appointed by the mayor of the city. There is a fifth member that is appointed alternatively by the governor and mayor each term.

The two problems that are plaguing the School District of Philadelphia at the moment are a severe lack of funding and the mismanagement of resources. In the school district, there are 149 elementary schools, 16 middle schools, and 49 high schools for a total of 214 schools and 131,362 students according to the last census. The student demographic is as follows: 52.8 percent are African American, 19 percent are Latino, and 14.4 percent are Caucasian.<sup>15</sup> Of the nearly 300 thousands people in the city in between five and 19 years of age, 72,655 are in Archdiocesan and private schools, 60,774 are in charter schools, and 131,362 are in traditional public schools.<sup>16</sup> While total funding has seen an increase since 1980, both as a whole, going from \$672,901,000 to \$983,928,923, and per student, going from roughly \$3,000 to \$6,590, that trend has reversed since the 2010-2011 school year.<sup>17</sup> The reversal of the trend coincides with Corbett taking office and control of the budget. Former Governor Ed Rendell spent \$9,569,539,000 during the 2010-2011 school year from the general fund expenditures budget on basic education. This school year marks the last time the budget has increased. The state government spent \$11,484,074,000 on education, which was 43.7 percent of the state budget. Alternatively, Corbett dedicated \$9,134,308,000 of the general fund expenditures budget to basic education and only spent \$10,410,106,000 of the total

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<sup>15</sup> "Snapshot Page," School District of Philadelphia, [phila.k12.pa.us](http://phila.k12.pa.us)

<sup>16</sup> "Total number of 5-19 years olds is from the 2010 decennial census," United States Census, [census.gov](http://census.gov); the number of Catholic school students: "Statistical Overview," Phila. Archdiocese, <http://archphila.org/statistics.php>; and the number of traditional and public schools students "School District: Information Page," School District of Philadelphia, [phila.k12.pa.us](http://phila.k12.pa.us)

<sup>17</sup> Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1981 Pennsylvania Abstract: A Statistical Fact Book, 1981, for the Basic Education Funding and school enrollment Pg 98; "Basic Education Funding 2010, 2000, and 1990," Pennsylvania Department of Education, <http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=509059&mode=2>

budget on education. This amount equates to 38.1 percent of the state budget. Corbett increased the percentage spent on education the following two years, but then decreased the amount for the 2014 budget.<sup>18</sup>

The School District of Philadelphia has had the largest student population and the highest numbers of students attend schools daily in the state for the past 15 years. Looking at the amount of funding in terms of the average attendance of all the schools, called Average Daily Membership (ADM), run by the School District of Philadelphia will make it clear how underfunded the schools are. The School District of Philadelphia was ranked 244 on a list of spending per number of students who attended school in the different districts in 1995. The ranking went to 283 in 2000, 196 in 2005, and 236 in 2010. To return to the comparison with the Lower Merion School District, that school district ranked 52 in 1995 and 47 in 2010.<sup>19</sup> While both of these school districts remain fairly consistent in terms of where they fall in the ranking, the trends in relative changes in spending reveal that the School District of Philadelphia is not as healthy as the Lower Merion School District. In order to become the school district that both has the largest population of students and spends the most per student, the School District of Philadelphia would need to double its spending to a grand total of \$5,514,217,096. It would need to increase spending by \$2,759,802,024.

The source of the difference in relative funding between the School District of Philadelphia becomes clear when the three levels of government are examined. The school districts that rank the highest for spending per student have tremendous local funding

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<sup>18</sup> “2010-2014 Executive Budgets,” PA Governor’s Budget Office,  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/office\\_of\\_the\\_budget\\_\\_\\_home/4408](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/office_of_the_budget___home/4408)

<sup>19</sup> “1995-2012 Expenditure Data for School Districts, Career and Technology Centers, and Charter Schools,” PA Department of Education,  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries\\_of\\_annual\\_financial\\_report\\_data/7673/afr\\_excel\\_data\\_files/509047](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries_of_annual_financial_report_data/7673/afr_excel_data_files/509047)

sources. Additionally, they have low levels of funding from the federal government, indicating a healthy financial situation. Out of 500 school districts, the School District of Philadelphia ranked 419 in terms of local revenue as of 2012. The school district only receives \$4,088 per student from local revenue. At the state level, the school district received \$6,830 per student and had a rank of 139. The school district did well at the federally level, receiving the fifth most revenue in the state at \$2,757 per student. The total revenue per ADM in the school district is \$13,800. This amount places the school district at 247 in the rankings and below the state average total per ADM of \$14,400. The Lower Merion School District was the highest ranked school district in terms of local funding with \$24,096 per student. It also receives \$2,823 per student from the state. While the Lower Merion School District may not be one of them, 200 school districts receive more state funding than the School District of Philadelphia.<sup>20</sup> The tax system in Philadelphia places its school district at such a disadvantage that without the state providing additional assistance, the relatively high revenue from federal funding per student will not be able to make up the difference in terms of the funding disparity.

The second and no less consequential issue with the school district is the mismanagement of resources. For example, in 2008 leadership decided to remove Superintendent Arlene Ackerman from her position at the cost of \$905,000. There had been an attempt by the SRC to solicit \$405,000 of the sum for the removal of Ackerman from anonymous donors, but the SRC mismanaged the process and caused donors to withdraw their pledges. There was a lot of criticism about the SRC requesting anonymous donations as

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<sup>20</sup> PA Department of Education, 1995-2012 “Revenue Data for School Districts, Career and Technology Centers, and Charter Schools” 2011-2012 Report  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries\\_of\\_annual\\_financial\\_report\\_data/7673/afr\\_excel\\_data\\_files/509047](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/summaries_of_annual_financial_report_data/7673/afr_excel_data_files/509047)

opposed to simply allowing donors to come forward with money. Superintendent William Hite has overseen the layoffs of thousands of school district employees and a growing budget deficit that exceeds \$200 million. He has also presided over the expansion of charter schools in the district.<sup>21</sup> Hite also has to deal with the unique structure of district leadership due to the presence of the SRC.

The SRC has not made the School District of Philadelphia any better off since taking control. In fact, the 2014 budget designed by the SRC required a massive deficit of nearly half a million dollars and needed \$220 million from an increase in the sales tax and other various sources just to continue certain services in the district.<sup>22</sup> The budget was created and released before all of the sources of funding had been determined. A lot of the funding sources were at the state level and required cooperation from the governor. The lack of planning is only one example of the mismanagement of resources in the School District of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) has a strong distaste for the SRC. In April of 2014, the school district asked the court to suspend the collective bargaining ability of teachers in the district. In a statement released in March of 2014, the PFT responded by stating,

The school district and the SRC have chosen to forsake negotiating in good faith in favor of a legal end-around to avoid meaningful contract talks with the PFT. The members of the PFT are partners in public education, not indentured servants.

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<sup>21</sup> Mezzacappa, Dale, “District lays off more than 3,700 employees”, *The Notebook*, June 7, 2013, <https://thenotebook.org/blog/136085/thousands-layoff-notices-going-out-today>

<sup>22</sup> Mezzacappa, Dale, “Lump sum budget counts on \$440 million not yet secured; principals storm Council”, *The Notebook*, March 27, 2014, <https://thenotebook.org/blog/147053/lump-sum-budget-counts-440-million-not-yet-hand>

Today's action by the school district belittles every PFT member, and signals an unwillingness to reach a fair contract with the city's educators.<sup>23</sup>

The union of teachers in the School District of Philadelphia has figured out how to control the process of hiring and placement for teachers using seniority. However, this results in younger teachers having limited opportunities to find jobs that they enjoy if they are fortunate enough to find jobs at all in the district. Hite apparently wants to "implement a range of work-rule reforms, and these include teacher assignment and transfer, layoff and recall, staffing levels, leveling, and the use of prep time."<sup>24</sup> The PFT is at odds with leadership in the district about decreasing pay, reforming the benefits of seniority, or any additional SRC involvement. The students in the School District of Philadelphia are suffering due to the conflict between the teachers union and the district leadership.

In order to prevent the School District of Philadelphia from collapsing completely, it is critical that the state implement a funding formula to make funding more equitable. The city of Philadelphia does not have the tax base to increase the school district's local revenue enough to make up the difference in funding from districts like Lower Merion. Additionally, the federal government will not increase the amount of funding it gives to schools because the nature of the relationship between the federal government and education funding. The only solution to the funding problem is to increase the amount schools in Philadelphia receive from the state government. The formula should involve variables such as rate of

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<sup>23</sup> George Jackson, "Statement from PFT President Jerry Jordan on School District Contract Actions," March 24, 2014, [http://thenotebook.org/sites/default/files/Statement\\_PFT\\_Jerry\\_Jordan\\_District\\_Contract\\_Actions.pdf](http://thenotebook.org/sites/default/files/Statement_PFT_Jerry_Jordan_District_Contract_Actions.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Mezzacappa, Dale, "Hite suspending seniority for September, seeking approval from Supreme Court," *The Notebook*, March 24, 2014, <http://thenotebook.org/blog/147039/hite-suspending-seniority-rules-september-going-supreme-court>

students living in poverty, enrollment, special education enrollment, and local tax revenues. While districts like Lower Merion would lose state funding, the overwhelming majority of their revenue is from local sources, so the decrease would hardly impact the quality of education in those school districts. It ought to declare an educational emergency in the district to increase spending and the funding of programs. The state should identify to schools that are performing the worst and ensure that students and families have access to adequate resources. Furthermore, there should be a halt on the creation of charter schools. The great majority of charter schools do not outperform traditional public schools, but take resources and funding away from traditional public schools. The state and city governments are abandoning the traditional school system. This act makes the problem worse and does not improve the quality of education for the students in Philadelphia. Finally, the SRC should be disbanded and control of the district should be localized as it is in every other school district in the state. The SRC is the cause of much of the effort to transition to a charter school system in the school district and is far removed from the realities of public education in Philadelphia. If a funding formula is implemented and control of the district is returned to the city, the School District of Philadelphia will have more money per student to spend without any additional federal or local costs. Furthermore, there will not be an increase in the state expenditures on public education, but merely a decrease in funding to wealthier school districts to allow for an increase in funding to districts in need.

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