

*The  
Jefferson  
Essays*

ERIE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS:  
HISTORY, CHALLENGES,  
FUTURE

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WINTER 2016  
ESSAY IV

*A Publication of The Jefferson Educational Society*

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# ERIE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: HISTORY, CHALLENGES, FUTURE

“Knowledge is power; therefore a general system of education should be adopted whereby the children of the poor shall share the blessing with those of the rich. This will enable our children in the future to hold that rank in society which their privileges entitle them to.”

– Erie Gazette Editorial  
August 12, 1830

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Frank Anderson, who authored an original work titled, *A History of the School District of the City of Erie, Pa. 1795-1970*, as well as to Dr. William Garvey and Dr. Robert Guerrein, who updated that text through 2010, and the JES, which published the updated edition of Anderson's text. Their archival research and dedication to the preservation and presentation of data and anecdotal information related to Erie's Public Schools simplified the construction of this essay. I'm always grateful for the editorial counsel of the Jefferson Educational Society Editorial Board, without whom my words are simply less and whose critique grounds this essay in an appropriate context. And last, but certainly not least, none of my work is possible without the support of my wife and our two daughters, who tolerate the exigence and isolation that accompany such work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Erie's Public Schools are in crisis. Inequitable funding by the Commonwealth and high rates of poverty and English Language Learners, as well as an abundance of students with learning disabilities, are just a few of the problems facing the district. Our urban public schools continue to face multimillion-dollar deficits even as the school district attempts to create annual balanced budgets as mandated by the State Legislature. In 2016, Erie Public Schools Superintendent Jay Badams threatened to close the city's high schools instead of cutting more valuable services and programs from those schools. In spite of short-term emergency funds that closed the 2016-2017 budget gap, the district will soon face the same fiscal shortfall.

As a result of the school district's ongoing financial troubles, it appears that violent crime increased. There were two incidents in July 2015: the murder of two 16-year-old students, Elijah Jackson and Shakur Franklin, at a house party following the annual Save-An-Eye All Star Scholastic city/county football game; and the fatal shooting of 18-year-old Jacob Pushinsky by 14-year-old Derrys Sanders, Jr., who was attempting to steal Pushinsky's bicycle. Underperforming schools located in the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods where many parents have elected to move their children into public charter schools may have contributed to the violence. There are four brick-and-mortar charter schools in the city as well as six cyber charter schools that enroll city residents. The school district is required by law to pay the tuition of children who live in the school district but elect to attend charter schools. As you'll read in the pages that follow, the mandate of Pennsylvania's charter school law strips the district of financial resources that could be used for quality educational programs and extracurricular activities, additional social services, and much needed investment in infrastructure.

This year, the district will begin to pilot a “community school strategy,” which seeks innovative solutions to restore many of the critical services that have been lost to fiscal austerity. A community school strategy leverages community partnerships and adopts community-centered curriculum that connects students to their schools as well as their neighborhoods. It’s a strategy that’s as much about creating social returns on investment as it is about accomplishing the mission of public education. By offering social services and adaptive curriculum, public schools nationwide hope to repatriate students lost to the charter school movement so that their identity, their affinity, and their future success reside in the neighborhoods in which they live, play, and learn as children. The community school strategy is, in many ways, a return to the community-centered education that shaped the district in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Further, it is my hope to illustrate a legacy of the Erie School District that includes creating programs, developing curriculum, and allocating resources that benefit the community, even when it burdens the district’s financial resources.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ERIE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

From the humble origins of Erie's first tuition school in 1805 through the establishment of the community's first free public elementary schools in the 1830s, a focus on education played an important role in the region's civic evolution. The Free School Act of 1834, which established a framework for free public elementary schools and the generation of revenue through local school taxes to meet the operating expenses of newly formed school districts, held no provision for secondary education. Many politicians and proponents of education for young children still believed that secondary education should be the domain of private tuition-based academies. Neither kindergarten education nor secondary education were included in Pennsylvania's early educational statutes. Nevertheless, by the 1850s, free public elementary schools had become the accepted norm.

Erie County had two private academies, The Waterford and Erie academies, which provided elementary as well as secondary education. The Erie Academy opened in 1819. It charged \$12.50 per quarter, per student. But as the population of Erie rapidly grew, the school could not support the number of students graduating from the elementary school system, many of whom came from families that would have been unable to pay the modest tuition fee. When Central High School, Erie's first free public high school, opened in 1866, 15 students matriculated from Erie Academy.

Between 1830 and 1900, the population of the City of Erie grew from just over 3,000 to more than 50,000. The late-century boom can be attributed to the vast influx of immigrants from Western Europe and Russia. Because many of these immigrants could not read, write, or speak English, the Erie Public Schools established an evening school to provide basic grammar and language skills to aid their assimilation. The evening school also provided important



life skills to Erieites who had left school at an early age, for any number of reasons, to help them attain employment in the city's diverse and burgeoning manufacturing and industrial labor pool. During the 1890-1891 school year, the evening school enrolled 490 students, of which nearly one-quarter were New Americans.

In 1900, Erie celebrated 65 years of free public education. In a report to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Erie Schools Superintendent H.C. Missimer reaffirmed the value of free public education to the community:

The public school is for the people, it is of the people. ... Its discipline, its rules, its laws, its every atmosphere are democratic. ... It teaches confidence in government, reverence for the law, respect for authority. It teaches, day by day, that one is not better than another, that all are one.

In that spirit, the school board authorized three kindergartens during the 1900-1901 academic year. However, space and funding prevented immediate expansion of the kindergarten program, limiting the district over the next decade to just two kindergartens - one downtown at West 10th and Cascade streets and a second on Federal Hill at West 26th and Peach streets.

By the turn of the 20th century, Erie's Public Schools prepared for its first financial crisis. From its inception, the nascent school district and its board of directors had operated primarily on a pay-as-you go policy. Upon the establishment of the School District of the City of Erie in 1870 by the Pennsylvania Legislature, that method of budget management was no longer possible. At that time, the boundaries of the school district were expanded to incorporate schools south of 26th Street, which were not yet within the city limits, and the population boom of the period brought with it many more school-aged children. Erie's previously debt-free public schools assumed some debt from the newly incorporated schools; a mandate that required all students to complete a full year in eighth grade; as well as interest generating

bonds, without which the district would not have been able to fund the construction of much-needed schools.

### **Erie Public School Buildings, 1895**

<b>School</b>	<b>Built</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Rooms</b>	<b>Capacity</b>
Jones	1858	7th and Holland	8	400
No. 10	1871 and 1893	5th and Plum	8	477
Jackson	1873	11th and French	5	181
Jefferson	1874 and 1890	23rd and Ash	8	431
Washington	1875	21st and Sassafras	8	440
Columbus	1875	17th and Poplar	8	486
Wayne	1875 and 1893	6th and East Ave.	8	407
Lafayette	1877	3rd and French	4	231
Penn	1881	10th and Ash	8	496
Longfellow	1883	8th and Walnut	8	482
Lowell	1885	16th and Sassafras	6	363
Central	1890	11th and Sassafras	20	862
Marshall	1891	12th between Holland and German	8	400
Franklin	1891	27th and Peach	8	400
No. 6 (temporary)	1892	25th and Cherry	4	187
Burns	1895	5th and Chestnut	10	359
Garfield	1895	21st and German	10	N/A

Source: Anderson, F., Garvey, W., and Guerrein, R. (2011). A History of the Erie, Pennsylvania School District, 1795-2010. Erie, Pa.: Jefferson Educational Society

Some turn-of-the-century classrooms in the district accommodated more than 50 students as both the city and the number continued to grow. To mitigate and disperse the concentration of students within its extant schools, the Erie School Board - composed of three elected members from each

of the city's six wards, with a third elected annually to a three-year term - began a building program in 1895 that included the construction of new schools as well as the renovation and expansion of established schools. The building program continued through 1931. By 1907, however, the school district faced severe deficits as a result of disparities between state appropriations and local taxation.

By 1907, the district provided kindergartens, a school attendance officer to regulate truancy, an ungraded school for immigrants and adults, vocational-technical training and home economics programs in the high school, as well as oversight of the city's free public library, which the school district opened in 1899 at a cost of more than \$153,000 - or \$4.2 million in 2016 dollars. Secretary of the School Board W.J. Flynn reported in 1907 that the Board was not able to reduce its bonded debt as required by law, nor was it able to meet the interest on outstanding bonds or meet its general operating expenses. By 1910, the School District of the City of Erie enrolled nearly 9,000 students, employed 265 teachers, and spent more than \$287,000 - or \$6.9 million in 2016 dollars. Just 15 years later, the city's population had nearly doubled, the student population more than doubled to 18,130 students, and the district employed 558 teachers. At that point, the district's annual expenditures exceeded \$2.4 million, more than \$33 million in 2016 dollars.

**Erie City Population and Public School Enrollment, 1880-1925**

Year	1880	1890	1895	1900	1910	1920	1925
Population	27,730	40,634	49,500(e st.)	52,733	66,525	93,372	100,000(est.)
Students in Public Schools	4,244	5,440	7,223	7,884	8,754	13,140	18,130
Percentage of Pop. in Public Schools	15.3	13.4	14.6	15	13.1	14.1	18.1

Source: Anderson, F., Garvey, W., and Guerrein, R. (2011). *A History of the Erie, Pennsylvania School District, 1795-2010*. Erie, Pa.: Jefferson Educational Society

The Great Depression ensured that the Erie School Board would be unable to reduce its bonded debt, which had ballooned to \$5,442,000 by 1938 (more than \$93 million in 2016 dollars), primarily as a result of necessary investments made in the district's building program. From 1925 to 1931, four schools were enlarged and three new elementary schools were constructed, in addition to the opening of Wilson Junior High School in 1927 and Strong Vincent High School in 1930. Central High School was also renovated to incorporate a shop wing that would allow the school to be used as the district's Technical High School.

The construction of Wilson Junior High, Strong Vincent High School, and the renovation to Central High School were all representative of changing demographics within the city of Erie. The first and second generations of Erieites, who had created the demand for elementary education at the turn of the century, were growing older, and birth rates stabilized as the population boom began to plateau. Moreover, World War I, the Great Depression, and social unrest in Europe challenged the confidence of families who needed to manage their size and financial responsibilities, just as the city's schools needed to manage their size and fiscal health. To that end, the school board closed seven of its oldest and lowest-enrolled schools between 1937 and 1940 because of declining elementary school enrollments. These school closures, as part of a larger strategy to reduce its bonded debt, began a 10-year campaign to return the district to financial solvency. By July 1948, the district had cut its debts in half, nearly \$2.5 million, or \$25 million adjusted for inflation in 2016 dollars.

By midcentury, the Erie Public Schools were being recognized for an innovative curriculum that included a War Production Training Program, which prepared approximately 13,000 men and women for work in Erie's war production facilities, and The Veteran's School, which held the mission of meeting the educational needs of World War II and Korean War veterans, many of whom had left school or had been permitted to graduate early in order to join the

war efforts. The Veterans School began in December 1945, just six months after the War Production Program came to an end. The school's slogan read:

*Accept the veteran where he is, find out where he wants to go, give him opportunity to get there on a time schedule that is convenient, allow him to travel at his own speed, and provide the help he needs when he wants it.*

These themes reflected the guiding principles of the school district over time, as it had developed programs to educate immigrants and the indigent during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Veterans School had programs in shop and trade practices, machining, auto repair and body work, drafting, plumbing, welding, entrepreneurship, and a host of other occupational skills that spanned the spectrum of employment and wage opportunity. Approximately, one-eighth of those enrolled in The Veterans School were non-veteran civilians: housewives who needed to learn how to drive a car, recent immigrants who wanted to learn English or acquire the knowledge necessary to apply for citizenship, and blue-collar workers seeking management skills that would assist in their professional mobility. In its first three years, The Veterans School enrolled nearly 6,000 adult learners who engaged in a self-paced, objective-driven education under the supervision of 42 full- and part-time instructors. This model of community-centered education set a national standard for adult education, and its legacy continues to influence community-centered educational strategies at all levels.

The population boom that followed World War II forced the Erie School Board to enter a new building program between 1950 and 1960. Birth rates in the City of Erie, Wesleyville Borough, and Lawrence Park, Greene, Harborcreek, Millcreek and Summit Townships collectively climbed from just under 3,000 in 1941 to more than 5,600 in 1958, with steady increases in the annual

birth rate in all but four of those years. City school enrollments increased by more than 5,500 students from January 1950 to January 1960, and unlike the previous era of capital development undertaken by the school board that was intended to address the needs of the district's high school population, the building program of the 1950s sought to rebuild Erie's elementary school infrastructure. Four schools - Glenwood (1951), Diehl (1953), Cleveland (1955), and Connell (1958) - were newly constructed, and two existing elementary schools - Harding and Hamilton - were expanded in 1951 and 1952, respectively. Construction of Memorial Junior High and Technical Memorial High School, which shared a common auditorium, gymnasium, and swimming pool, was also completed under this program.

The cost of this construction exceeded the ability of the school board to issue bonds large enough to cover its costs. Technical Memorial High School, alone, carried a price tag of more than \$3.3 million. In the election of 1955, in order to issue bonds that exceeded 2 percent of its assessed valuation, the school board sought voter approval of a referendum to issue additional bonds in the election of 1955. Voters approved this bond issue by a margin of four to one. Support for public schools in 1955 was illustrative of the community's commitment to public education. That spirit was summarized by Superintendent C. Herman Grose in his budget presentation to the school board in March 1949:

*An educational system that meets the needs of the community it serves in a satisfactory manner should be supported by the public with sufficient financial income to pay the necessary costs. Education is like any other commodity. The buyer gets what he pays for. ... Year after year the schools have had many additional activities brought to their doors. These activities require more personnel, more supplies, more equipment, more room, more operation and maintenance cost; in short, more money. ... Every school district has to face the issue squarely and find a way to pay the cost of the educational program which the community wishes to have for its children.*

# THE MODERN CRISIS

## **Budget Process**

The building program of the 1950s marked the end of a progressive era in the history of public education in Erie. In the decades that followed, nationwide challenges to de facto segregation brought with them changes to busing, school composition, and curriculum; unpredictable economic cycles across the region and nation that profoundly affected tax bases on which public schools are funded; and urban sprawl resulting from such socio-economic variables influenced the direction of public education in different, but significant, ways.

However, of the many issues that challenged public education policy and administration in the late 20th century, three stand out as having lasting impacts on Erie's Public Schools. First, the decentralization of budget authority from the superintendent of schools to the school board wrestled control of educational costs from educators and empowered elected officials to influence educational outcomes through the administration of the budget. This change occurred organically in Erie. Through 1945, the superintendent of public schools would receive funding requests from principals or the heads of schools and evaluate those requests for inclusion in the annual operating budget that then would be submitted and routinely approved as the cost of doing business.

Historically, the primary function of the school board was to generate and administer revenue on behalf of the district. In 1946, a minority of board members wanted to take a greater role in the budget process and, by 1947, budget requests from individual schools bypassed the superintendent and went directly to the school board for review. Effectively, this change established the modern practice of school governance in which school boards evaluate and allocate budget requests that are later managed by district administration. Through this practice, public school

budgets nationwide have become political bargaining chips at all levels of government.

## **School funding**

In many ways, public schools have always been underfunded in Pennsylvania. The Free Schools Act of 1834 required school districts to raise \$2 from local taxes for every dollar it received from the state. This created massive inequality in school funding. Small rural communities received almost no money from the state because they had no way of generating local tax revenue. More than a century later, the State Legislature passed a law in 1965 requiring the Commonwealth to pay 50 percent of the cost of public education, but the state rarely met its commitment. However, the state funded public education at 55 percent in 1974, but every year after that funding for public education decreased, reaching an all-time low of 36 percent in 2006. That same year the Legislature commissioned what is known as the “Costing-out Study,” which concluded that school districts should be funded based on a formula that favors districts that are larger, poorer, and have higher property taxes. That formula was supposed to be implemented in 2008, but it has never been fully funded. So-called reformers have questioned the weighting system used to assign funds to at-risk districts, wondering if students couldn’t be adequately educated for less.

In 2015, a bipartisan Basic Education Funding Commission recommended a fair funding formula that would put Pennsylvania back in step with the other 92 percent of the nation that uses a structured funding formula to disperse money for education. However, this fair funding formula only applies to newly allocated educational funding, and analysts expect this formula to take more than 20 years to equalize funding between prosperous districts with strong tax bases compared to those districts, urban and rural, with both waning tax bases and increasingly larger populations of at-risk students.



According to findings by the Education Law Center, Pennsylvania strategically invested state education funding in order to ensure students had the necessary resources to meet state academic standards between 2003 and 2010. This funding strategy distributed state appropriations based on the needs of students as well as the geographic and demographic characteristics of each district. School districts with low tax bases and larger populations, as well as those with larger gaps in educational attainment and more at-risk youth, received more money. Not surprisingly, the school districts that received the largest increase in funding during this time also experienced the greatest improvement in student achievement.

The funding matrix used by the Gov. Ed Rendell administration (2003-2011) was so successful that it served as a model for the majority of U.S. states that have adopted what's now known as "sound education funding." That formula accounts for the number of students in each district, community poverty levels, and local tax rates, with additional consideration given to districts with large populations of English Language Learners. Forty-seven states use at least one variable other than base costs (instructional costs, support services, non-instructional costs, and facilities) to distribute funds.

Pennsylvania, however, has since abandoned these funding variables in favor of a funding practice known as "hold-harmless," in which school districts are guaranteed allocations at least equal to the previous year's allocation. This method does not incorporate into district disbursements the cost of educating children in poverty, the number of English Language Learners in a district, or charter school payments, and it creates a gross disparity between districts that have been awarded significant one-time disbursements, which then become part of their annual budget reports as part of the "hold-harmless" practice. Only nine states currently allocate less money for public education than Pennsylvania, and the Commonwealth remains one of three states

with no explicit formula for funding public education.

According to the Education Law Center, school districts statewide receive on average approximately 43 percent of their funding from Harrisburg, 13 percent from the federal government, and the rest from local revenue, composed primarily of property tax payments. Although this disbursement varies widely from district to district, this distribution ratio is particularly problematic in the City of Erie, with its diminished tax base, high poverty rates, and a declining population of single-family homeowners. In fact, local revenues are so deficient that the Erie School District currently receives nearly 70 percent of its operating budget from the state and federal government and is forced to make concessions like closing schools, laying off teachers, and increasing class sizes to remain in operation. The \$186 million budget put forth for the 2017 academic year does little to close Erie's gap between what is needed to properly educate each child and what it can afford to spend.

### **Rising Poverty Rates**

The number of economically disadvantaged children in the City of Erie and attending public elementary schools here has grown at alarming rates over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the average number of economically disadvantaged public school students in 2006 was nearly 80 percent districtwide. By 2014, that average had increased by more than 6 percent. Four schools in 2006 had rates of economically disadvantaged students less than 70 percent: Grover Cleveland Elementary (61.2), Harding Elementary (62.8), JoAnne Connell Elementary (66.8), and Jefferson Elementary (69.4). Also by 2014, those same schools saw radical increases in children in need of

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, "It is at the discretion of the District to determine if a student is economically disadvantaged. Poverty data sources such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cases, census poor, Medicaid, children living in institutions that are neglected or delinquent, those supported in foster homes or free/reduced price lunch eligibility may be used."

free or reduced lunch, breakfast programs, or other factors that identify them as economically disadvantaged. This cohort of students at Jefferson Elementary increased 18.9 percent and now nears 90 percent schoolwide; Grover Cleveland increased 17.6 percent and now nears 80 percent schoolwide. JoAnna Connell and Harding elementary schools have child poverty rates of 74.4 percent, the lowest in the Erie School District. Perry Elementary saw the number of economically disadvantaged children there increase 14.1 percent, the third-largest increase in the city, leaving Perry with an overall rate greater than 88 percent. Part of the increase can be attributed to the redistribution of poverty from the three schools that the district closed during this period for financial reasons: Burton Elementary, which had the highest poverty rate in the district in 2006 (94.4); Irving Elementary (87.2); and Glenwood Elementary (77.4). The only school that experienced a decline in economically disadvantaged children was Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary, where rates dropped 4.4 percent between 2006 and 2014. Nevertheless, the rate of economically disadvantaged students in that school remains just above 90 percent.

In 2016, eight of the City's 11 public elementary schools have rates of economically disadvantaged students greater than 80 percent. Just 10 years ago, there were only four. Additionally, the neighborhoods surrounding Emerson-Gridley Elementary and those near Jefferson Elementary also have the City's highest concentrations of children under 5 living in poverty. These schools will soon serve those populations.

### Erie Public Schools Enrollment (2015) and Academic Score

School	Enrollment	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Percent English Language Learners	Percent Special Education	Academic Score
Central HS	975	79.69	4.1	22.87	60.3*
East HS	991	84.26	25.13	18.57	56.1*
NWPA Collegiate Academy	789	40.43	0.13	0.63	79.6*
Strong Vincent HS	685	80.15	9.49	23.94	42.2*
Roosevelt MS	633	77.25	6.95	23.06	59.5**
Wilson MS	737	88.33	13.3	21.17	58.7**
Connell ES	585	76.24	2.74	17.26	75.2**
Diehl ES	545	92.84	15.41	11.56	60.7**
Pfeiffer-Burleigh ES	781	90.52	18.57	14.85	54.6**
Cleveland ES	606	75.58	3.96	14.19	80**
Jefferson ES	524	83.78	9.54	11.83	71.5**
Edison ES	529	87.33	8.13	16.82	54.2**
Lincoln ES	441	85.03	4.54	22.68	65.7**
McKinley ES	581	86.06	11.19	17.21	57.8**
Perry ES	502	81.67	1.59	18.33	66**
Emerson-Gridley ES	620	84.84	6.29	18.71	63.5**
Harding ES	601	72.71	1.66	15.64	78**
Wayne MS	629	87.76	12.72	15.1	50.9**

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Performance Profile

Color Key

Grades 9-12	Grades 6-8	Grades K-8	Grades K-5	PreK-5	PreK-6	PreK-8
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\* AY2014-2015

\*\* AY2013-2014

## THE CHARTER SCHOOL PROBLEM

Climbing poverty rates, unbalanced school funding, and a visceral reaction to growing bureaucratic oversight of curriculum also gave rise to the charter school movement in the United States. The charter school philosophy was intended to provide educators with a space to implement innovative curriculum. “Education by charter” was an idea originally introduced in 1974 by Ray Budde, a professor of educational administration at the University of Massachusetts. But it wasn’t until 1988 that the idea received popular recognition when the American Federation of Teachers endorsed a restructuring of school districts that would provide teachers with agency in the educational process by “chartering” schools within a district. These designated schools would be granted a charter by the district to allow the teachers to gain control over the instructional modes within their schools. In 1991, the first charter schools opened in Minnesota following the passage of charter school legislation. Five years later there were more than 800 charter schools in 25 states.

The concept was quickly embraced by political conservatives, who viewed charter schools as an alternative to public schools that were deemed to be both overfunded and underperforming. Competition between public charter schools and traditional public schools, many believed, would incentivize underperforming schools to keep pace with federally mandated educational benchmarks. However, unlike other non-traditional schools models, such as parochial and independent schools, which are funded by tuition and other sources of private capital, charter schools would also absorb tax revenue from the school districts that authorized the charter. In other words, charter schools would receive per-student tuition, as well as transportation costs, from the chartering school districts.

While the charter school option offered an alternative for parents who were concerned about the quality of traditional public

schools, it also depleted the operating budgets of schools and districts that were the beneficiaries of state education funding and local tax dollars. By 2012, charter schools had amassed significant political will at both the state and federal level that Mitt Romney, former Massachusetts governor and then-Republican presidential candidate, famously stated: “Charter schools are so successful that almost every politician can find something good to say about them.”

Despite that political acclaim, the actual success of charter schools remains relative. Some charter schools offer specialty curriculum in the arts, music, or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields, while others simply offer a version of traditional public school curriculum. In Pennsylvania, the State Legislature passed its first charter school law, known as Act 22, in 1997, requiring charter schools to hire certified teachers and to maintain state education standards. Similar to charter schools in other states, Commonwealth charters receive tuition payments and transportation costs from the chartering district; however, the schools are run by financial administrators more akin to corporate chief executives rather than academic administrators. In effect, although they have school boards, in many ways, charter schools have become private institutions operated with public money.

Furthermore, advocates of charter schools have created a logical fallacy in claiming that the dispersion of students from traditional public schools into charter schools lowers the operating costs of those public schools. For example, if six elementary schools each lose three fifth-grade students to a charter school, the charter school now operates a single sixth-grade class, while the public school must continue to operate all six fifth-grade classrooms without reducing instructional or operational costs in those classrooms. Funding and operational mandates led Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale to declare that “Pennsylvania has the worst Charter School Law in the United States.”

The City of Erie is home to four brick-and-mortar charter schools in addition to six cyber charter schools. More than 1,600 students were enrolled in the City of Erie's traditional charter schools and an additional 486 students in its six cyber charter schools in 2015 at a cost to the Erie School District of more than \$22 million. Since 2005, charter school enrollments have increased by nearly 450 percent in the city. Charter schools receive \$9,089 per traditional student and \$17,039 for students with special education needs. The Erie School District estimates that charter school payments will increase by 8.5 percent in the 2016-2017 academic year.

### Charter School Enrollment Statistics

School	Enrollment	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Percent English Language Learners	Percent Special Education
Robert Benjamin Wiley Charter School	395	99.75	0	24.8
Perseus House Charter School of Excellence	593	73.86	18.72	25.3
Erie Rise Leadership Academy Charter School	308	100	0	14.94
Montessori Regional Charter School	425	58.82	1.18	9.65

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Performance Profile

Like Erie's Public Schools, the community's charter schools face challenges among their student populations. Two of Erie's four charter schools serve student populations who are entirely economically disadvantaged and nearly three-quarters of the Perseus House Charter School of Excellence is economically disadvantaged. Citywide, more than 80 percent of the charter school population is economically disadvantaged, nearly 20 percent have been identified as special education students, and approximately 5 percent of these students are English Language Learners.

These demographics, collectively, mirror the comprehensive rates of students living in poverty, English Language Learners, and special education students attending mainstream public schools. However, there is one significant difference between Erie's charter schools and its public schools: charter schools are funded at rates exceeding 100 percent of their expenditures. Robert Benjamin Wiley Charter School and Montessori Regional Charter School, for example, receive more than 90 percent of total revenue from local sources, while Perseus House Charter School of Excellence and Erie Rise Leadership Academy Charter School each receive more than 80 percent of total revenue from local sources.

### **Charter School Funding, AY2012-2013**

<b>School</b>	<b>Local Revenue (2012-2013)</b>	<b>Total Revenue (2012-2013)</b>	<b>Total Expenditures (2012-2013)</b>
Robert Benjamin Wiley Charter School	\$4,014, 211	\$4,338, 271	\$4,309,773
Perseus House Charter School of Excellence	\$6,134,389	\$7,395,733	\$6,912,980
Erie Rise Leadership Academy Charter School	\$3,046,473	\$3,448,102	\$2,829,553
Montessori Regional Charter School	\$3,495,513	\$3,806,470	\$3,722,281

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Performance Profile



Cyber charter schools have an equally egregious funding mechanism. For 2015-2016, cyber charter schools received more than \$436 million tax dollars statewide, of which nearly \$4 million was spent on advertising. The Erie Public Schools, alone, will make an estimated \$4.6 million in tuition payments to cyber charter schools this academic year. In surrounding districts, where cyber charter enrollment exceeds brick-and-mortar charter enrollment, cyber charter payments are much higher. In Harborcreek, for example, the school district will make 75 percent of its charter school payments to various cyber charter schools operating in Pennsylvania. Each of these schools - both cyber and traditional - is tuition free and each school reports positive revenues each year, even though no single cyber charter school and few of the brick-and-mortar charter schools in Pennsylvania meet the minimum educational standards of the Commonwealth. In other words, each of these schools meets the private school philosophy of generating profits and operating “within its means,” despite the fact that only one local charter school “makes the grade.”

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (DoE) assesses school performance for every public school, charter school, and cyber charter school operating in the Commonwealth. The DoE aggregates achievement indicators in science, math, literature, and other areas indicative of college readiness and compiles a “Building Level Academic Score.” An academic score is a number similar to a traditional classroom grading scale: 90 to 100 = A, 80-89 = B, etc. Scores below 70 are problematic and, like the classroom, scores below 60 are failing.

### Charter School Academic Score, 2014-2015

School	Academic Score
Robert Benjamin Wiley Charter School	59.3
Perseus House Charter School of Excellence	57
Erie Rise Leadership Academy Charter School	61.5
Montessori Regional Charter School	78.5

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Performance Profile

In Erie, only the Montessori Regional Charter School performs above average. The remaining three charter schools earned a composite score of approximately 60. These three underperforming schools all serve massive economically disadvantaged populations and each of them have sizable populations of students who require special education. The Perseus House Charter School of Excellence, which has the lowest academic score, also has a high percentage of English language learners. These factors – poverty, English Language Learners, and special education – highly correlate with low academic scores at schools across the nation, so underperforming schools should not be unexpected. These are also contributing factors to the low academic performance in some of Erie’s Public Schools, but when coupled with the underfunding that is a direct result of public education funds being passed to charter schools through the public school system, Erie’s Public Schools face near insurmountable odds. Nevertheless, charter schools in the city operate at an advantage over public schools that should help to offset the challenges wrought by educating cohorts of students living poverty. The fact that charter schools are fully funded provides that advantage.

## THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL SOLUTION

School districts nationwide are in search of ways to rescue their students from failing charter schools and reclaim tax revenue that was intended to level the educational playing field between economically advantaged and disadvantaged districts. Instead, public school districts spend a significant portion of their annual allocations subsidizing charter schools. Poor urban districts, already disadvantaged by small and shrinking tax bases, also sponsor a disproportionate number of charter schools because impoverished communities – such as Philadelphia, where more than 25 percent of the public school budget is redirected to charter schools – have become hotbeds of predatory charter activity as a result of failing public schools. Collective demands of “Public Funds for Public Schools” and lamentations toward “billionaire bullies” who are profiting from online and face-to-face charter schools while depleting much needed financial resources from struggling public schools have engendered the support for strategies that attempt to rescue public schools from the bureaucratic non sequiturs that are charter school legislation.

The movement for community based strategies to reconnect public schools to the neighborhoods they serve – known as the “community schools strategy” – has had resounding success nationwide. Community school strategies, generally, operate on a system that connects academic achievement with family support systems, health and social services, and community development. For skeptics, such buzzwords may be unimpressive. However, if we consider the community schools strategy as a renaissance of the traditional values upon which public education in the United States was founded, these elements of successful community building begin to take on new meaning. According to the Coalition for Community Schools, this strategy shares common elements regardless of the individual variables that have affected a community. These elements include:

- A core instructional program that is delivered by qualified teachers and is organized around a challenging curriculum and high standards and expectations for students.
- Student engagement and motivation - in school and community settings - before, during, and after school and during the summer.
- Recognition of the basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families and commitment to addressing those needs.
- Mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families, and school staff members.
- Community engagement, together with school efforts, that promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.

The community school strategy has been implemented in communities nationwide with astounding success. In Ohio, the Cincinnati School District was in peril. Between 1975 and 2010, urban sprawl reduced the district's school-aged population from 90,000 to just 28,000 students. The tax base was comparatively non-existent. In 1999, the district initiated a public referendum to repair crumbling school infrastructure. It failed. Only 19 percent of the voting population in Cincinnati had school-aged children and only half of those went to public schools. Cincinnati public schools were on the verge of collapse.

Recognizing that the community at-large was in need of health and social services as well as community programming for both children and adults, the Cincinnati School District declared that all of its public schools would become Community Learning Centers, which would provide medical clinics that provide primary health services and co-located mental health services;

they provide exercise classes, and book clubs; and they provide college and career counseling, in addition to tutoring services that link the district's accelerated learning programs. Since 2006, the results of these programs are staggering.

In 2006, the district faced an achievement gap nearing 15 percent, a graduation rate of 51 percent, and 14 of the city's 55 schools were in a state of academic emergency. By 2015, 43 of the district's 55 schools had been designated Community Learning Centers and the achievement gap dropped to 4 percent, the graduation rate climbed to 82 percent, and only three schools remained in a state of academic emergency. In 2010, the Cincinnati School District was named the top urban school district in the state of Ohio. This success began with two simple questions: What kind of schools do you want for your children? And what kind of neighborhood do you want to live in? Today, the district has turned its attention to homelessness and quality housing as an addendum to its academic success.

In the 1980s, Kentucky was widely considered to have the worst educational system in America. The state ranked 43rd in the nation for per-pupil education funding with local funding for some districts a paltry \$80 per student; it ranked 49th in post-high school college enrollment, and last in the United States for adults with a high school diploma. In a landmark Kentucky Supreme Court case, *Rose v. Council for Better Education* (1989), the Court ruled that the state's General Assembly had failed to provide "an efficient system of common education." In his decision on behalf of the Court, Chief Justice Robert F. Stephens wrote:

*Lest there be any doubt, the result of our decision is that Kentucky's entire system of common schools is unconstitutional. There is no allegation that only part of the common school system is invalid, and we find no such circumstance. This decision applies to the entire sweep of the system - all its parts and parcels.*

*This decision applies to the statutes creating, implementing and financing the system and to all regulations, etc., pertaining thereto. This decision covers the creation of local school districts, school boards, and the Kentucky Department of Education to the Minimum Foundation Program and Power Equalization Program. It covers school construction and maintenance, teacher certification – the whole gamut of the common school system in Kentucky.*

In response to this decision, the General Assembly passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990) creating a statewide system of community schools known as the Family Resource and Youth Service Centers. The Education Reform Act created a funding formula based on educational outcomes, it provided additional monies based on student needs, and it created a fiduciary support mechanism for the Family Resource and Youth Service Centers. It was true educational reform. The family resource centers provided before-and-after-school child care, family literacy services, as well as health services and referrals. The youth service centers, in addition to providing health and social services, offered career and college counseling, implemented a summer jobs program, and administered substance abuse programs as well as family crisis counseling. Today, the state's education system is ranked 27th in the nation. It was 48th nationwide less than two decades ago. It has the ninth highest graduation rate in the country and it has the lowest achievement gap between rich and poor students in the nation.

Cincinnati, Ohio and Kentucky each share analogous traits with Erie and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, respectively. Erie has experienced a steady decline in school-aged population over the past several decades as a result of urban sprawl and it, too, has struggled to reconcile the effects of a diminishing tax base and the absence of an equitable state funding formula as it deals with aging infrastructure and growing populations of English language learners and special needs students among its abundance of

students living in poverty. Moreover, the Commonwealth has gone from being a model of educational efficiency in the early 2000s to being the target of educational reformers for the absence of a fair funding formula, a lack of support for early childhood education, and the incremental dismantling of public higher education. Pennsylvania now ranks 45th nationally in education funding and 41st in early childhood education, according to the annual national education report, "Quality Counts."

In an attempt to leverage revenues and meet the needs of both the district and the community, Erie Public Schools announced in summer 2016 that it would pilot a community schools initiative in five of its 18 elementary and middle schools: Edison Elementary School, Emerson-Gridley Elementary School, McKinley Elementary School, Pfeiffer-Burleigh School, and Wayne School. The program is estimated to cost approximately \$100,000 per school, per year. Each school will feature comprehensive support of the students and the community in which the school is located. This involves an adaptive curriculum that is community centered, including service opportunities and experiential learning in the community to strengthen the bond between people and place; co-located health services, mental health services, and family support agencies; as well as adult education and workforce training. The cornerstone of community schools is community building.

The success of a community school strategy is contingent on partnerships with agencies that already operate in these neighborhoods. Each school will be matched with a lead partner agency, which connects the school to appropriate external resources and serves as a liaison between the school and the community, and a community school director, which is separate from and independent of the school principal. This autonomy allows the community school director to ensure that the basic personal needs of the students are being met and it allows the principal to focus the educational needs of the students and the day-to-day administration of the school. Where those two roles

overlap, resources are taxed and opportunities to provide social and academic support are often missed. Community school directors are vetted and hired by the lead partner.

The objectives of the community school strategy nationwide are to improve student-teacher relationships by allowing the teachers to focus on the educational needs of the students while the community school partners tend to the life needs of the students. On a regular basis, we hear anecdotal evidence of teachers going well beyond their job descriptions to tend to the personal needs of students who might come to school each day - if they come to school each day - from difficult home lives. Each day scores of students come to school hungry, some not having eaten since the previous day's lunch period; or students who leave school one afternoon only to find themselves homeless because their parents or caretaker have been evicted from their apartments during the school day; or the number of children who are exposed to crime, violence, and blight in their neighborhoods and in their lives. Stories such as these are silent travelers that emigrate into each classroom and each social interaction, impacting the quality of both while placing students and teachers behind on their agendas, many times well before the school day begins.

Other school districts in Pennsylvania have had great success utilizing a community school strategy to address community needs. In Lancaster, the regional community foundation funded a refugee community school and brought together the School District of Lancaster, SouthEast Lancaster Health Services, and the Lancaster County Refugee Coalition, and other community partners to address the needs of the rapidly expanding refugee population there. According to the Lancaster Intermediate Unit, "The Community School model provides a safe space for refugee families moving into Lancaster. It is a source of empowerment for families, offering programs such as: Adult Cultural Orientation, Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) and General Education Development (GED) classes, financial literacy,



home/landlord rights and responsibilities, civic engagement and citizenship classes, health and mental health education, and job training. The services will not be duplicated but rather complement resettlement efforts and next step opportunities. The Community School will provide a hub for networks, information, and resources in order to bringing together refugee families, local providers, and community members.”

In Erie, more than \$1.5 million in seed funding was provided through the collaborative efforts of the Erie Community Foundation, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, the Susan Hirt Hagen Fund for Transformational Philanthropy, and the United Way, with additional funds coming from the district and its corporate partners. Each school will conduct a needs assessment to determine what particular programs and services are necessary for that community of students and families. Both the needs assessment and the evaluation of outcomes will be an ongoing process as the schools and the neighborhoods evolve. Each school develops relationships with lead partners, community agencies, and hire community school directors. To be sure, it is a process that will require commitment from the leadership of Erie's Public Schools and patience on the part of the community it serves. The community school strategy is predicated upon the belief that public education is the foundation of a democratic society. If permitted to blossom, Erie's community schools will begin to restore the community's faith in a system that was originally designed to support them.

## CONCLUSIONS

Community schools are an effective strategy to address the challenges facing public education. The introduction of the community school strategy in Erie is, in many respects, a return to the tradition of service to the community embraced at the creation of the public school system with city's youth in mind, and later in the era of World War II, when the public school system created the War Production Training Program and Erie's Veterans School. The community school strategy combines the best of those periods in our city's past, merging the objective potential for student success with the betterment of the families and neighborhoods in which they live. In this way, Erie's Public Schools should be supported in this endeavor and it should not be permitted to fail for lack of state funding or at the hands of bureaucrats who confuse standardized assessments and the intrinsic value of public education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **LOBBY** the state Legislature and Governor's Office for a fair funding model as well as charter school reform. Charter schools must be held accountable for their general lack of educational achievement and the revenue they receive just as traditional schools must be held accountable. Moreover, charter school funding should not come at the expense of traditional public schools. In the case of Erie's Public Schools, the charter school laws have in some ways disadvantaged more than 12,000 students for the benefit of approximately 2,000 students.
- **ELECT** local officials who support public education and who are willing to lobby state officials on the behalf of students. In the past two years, public school students in the City of Erie have received a better civics lesson than any textbook could provide. It's time that our elected officials model behavior worthy of that civics lesson. There will be no better way to foster agency, community affinity, and a calling for leadership than to demonstrate the value students have to places they call home.
- **PATIENT EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL** is necessary to allow the community school strategy to form and flourish. The success of similar initiatives in Ohio, Kentucky, and elsewhere in the United States are the result of longitudinal investment, not overnight success.
- **SUSTAINED INVESTMENT** in the community schools strategy is critical to its success. Investments in education pay dividends. The Education Law Center estimates that investing in early childhood education and, in particular, pre-K education would yield a return of \$7 for every taxpayer dollar invested in education. Moreover, Pennsylvania would save nearly \$300 million annually on the cost related to crime and incarceration if graduation rates among young men increased by just 5 percent.

Taxpayers are seeking relief, particularly in communities with diminished tax bases where property owners are burdened with a disproportionate share of local taxation. Philadelphia passed a first-in-the-nation “soda tax” in June 2016 in an effort to unburden its tax base from rising costs. The soda tax, which takes effect in January 2017, is expected to raise \$91 million annually by charging a 1.5-cent per ounce tax on sugar-sweetened and diet beverages. Among other initiatives, the soda tax revenues will be used to expand pre-kindergarten programs in the city, create community schools, as well as improve parks, recreation centers and libraries. Thirty-three states have some form of soda tax with an average state tax rate of 5.2 percent. This was one effort nationally to fund public education and other programs without raising taxes on property owners. The beverage industry has opposed the tax in the Pennsylvania courts, but the jury of public opinion continues to deliberate on alternative taxes. Nevertheless, research validates the claim that investment in education lowers non-educational costs of unintended social consequences that occur as a result of inequitable education funding.

In addition to the half-measures taken by the Pennsylvania Legislature to address inequitable funding for public education, discussions of charter school reform also dot the political landscape. However, those efforts, largely led by conservatives in the State Senate, expand local charter school provisions, rather than curb the pass-through funding that provides surplus revenues to charter schools - online as well as brick-and-mortar - while only 22 percent of charter schools statewide receive an academic performance score greater than 70 from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Pennsylvania was once a leader in systemic educational funding. The 50 school districts with the greatest increases in funding correspondingly saw the greatest impact on student achievement. When funding is accurately aligned with variables

including poverty, disabilities, or English language proficiency, and community resources are marshaled to attend to students' needs, inter-district disparities in educational opportunity are neutralized. If the Erie School District, with the help of its partners, commits the same level of effort and financial resources to the success of the community schools strategy as it did for the establishment of the Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy in the 1990s, it will have made the most significant strides in more than a half-century toward narrowing the achievement gap between its most privileged students and those who live furthest from the intersection of access and opportunity.

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