



Seeking Justice in Funding Public Education

A Pastoral Letter

of the Episcopal Bishops of Pennsylvania

Adopted during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2003

***Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. Proverbs 31:8-9***

Over the past 30 years, Pennsylvania has allowed its funding of public education to suggest that some children are worth more than others. We bishops of five Episcopal dioceses invite you to consider reversing an escalating spiral of inequity.

As public education has increased its reliance on local taxes, the Commonwealth's funding for our children's education has decreased from 55 to 35 percent. The practical result is an unforgiving gap -- up to \$8,500 difference per child -- in the amount wealthy and poor districts provide for public education. The gap suggests that we tolerate economic segregation, that a substandard education is adequate for the poor and near poor.

Are some of our children worth \$8,500 a year more than others? Should the quality of their education be determined by their zip code?

More than 85 percent of Pennsylvania's children attend public schools. Most of those oppressed by inequity live in rural areas and inner cities where family poverty is an overwhelming challenge for teachers and administrators.

All kids are created equal; but their schools are not. What can we do about this inequity? We know what makes public education work. We see how it works in school districts that are adequately funded.

Whether we are business leaders, teachers, administrators or school board members, labor or management, Republicans or Democrats, we are united on this: every child deserves an equal opportunity to have a quality education. To be satisfied with less would be irresponsible, immoral, not very smart, and a waste.

During the most recent political campaigns in Pennsylvania, there seems to have been bipartisan agreement that something must be done about the inequity in how we pay for public schools. The consensus on this matter is broad. Members of both parties introduced legislation to correct the inequity. Both school boards and teachers' groups want this to happen. We understand that Governor Rendell will call the Pennsylvania General Assembly into special session to address the inequitable base that finances the education of our children.

We challenge you to support a system of taxation that decreases reliance on local property or wage taxes and returns the state to at least a 50 percent partnership in the funding of our public schools.

We challenge you to provide equal-opportunity resources so that every child will have access to a high quality education, beginning with pre-kindergarten and including full-day kindergarten, smaller class size, improved and expanded staff development, and family and social service linkages.

We challenge you to advocate for a statewide accountability system that rewards schools that excel and supports schools that struggle.

We ask you not to subscribe to economic and social priorities that allow children to languish in poorly funded schools while escalating levels of public funds are spent for their incarceration later in life.

We challenge you to participate in or create local groups that study and advocate for a just system of funding public education. We encourage you to take part in diocesan vigils and rallies locally and in Harrisburg. Above all, we urge you to write as soon as possible your legislators in the state House of Representatives and Senate from your district and tell them you want results through a comprehensive public school funding act.

We look to those without children or whose children are grown to care for *society's* children. We beg you to support changes necessary to insure that all school districts receive adequate resources to provide for our children, regardless of their creed, their race, their economic status or their social status.

We encourage church leaders and all Pennsylvania Episcopalians to hear St. Paul who tells us that if one part of the body suffers we all suffer.

In our baptismal covenant, we Episcopalians promise to strive for justice. By General Convention resolution we have committed ourselves to support and improve public education, especially in urban and rural areas. We are therefore challenged to advocate for justice and systemic reform in our funding of public schools.

Our participation in the movement, *Good Schools Pennsylvania*, to support, strengthen and reform our public schools is based on both our religious belief that every person is created in God's own image and our civic responsibility to provide our children with equal opportunity in public education.

For the love of God and for the sake of the children who have been left behind, please join us in attempting to reverse this spiral of inequity.

We remain your servants in the Lord,

The Rt. Rev. Charles E. Bennison Jr.
Bishop, Diocese of Pennsylvania

The Rt. Rev. Clarence N. Coleridge
Assisting Bishop, Diocese of Pennsylvania

The Rt. Rev. Michael W. Creighton
Bishop, Diocese of Central Pennsylvania

The Rt. Rev. Robert W. Duncan
Bishop, Diocese of Pittsburgh

The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall
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The Rt. Rev. Robert D. Rowley, Jr.
Bishop, Diocese of Northwest Pennsylvania

The Rt. Rev. Henry Scriven
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