

LOCAL NEWS

SUBSCRIBER ONLY

Education officials, politicians from Delaware, Montgomery counties endorse governor's proposed education funding increase

'A historic first step,' says William Penn teachers union president



On Thursday, officials advocate for proposed education funding increases in Gov. Josh Shapiro's proposed 2024-25 budget. (ALEX ROSE – DAILY TIMES)



By **ALEX ROSE** | arose@delcotimes.com | The Delaware County Daily Times

PUBLISHED: March 22, 2024 at 7:10 a.m. | UPDATED: March 22, 2024 at 7:12 a.m.



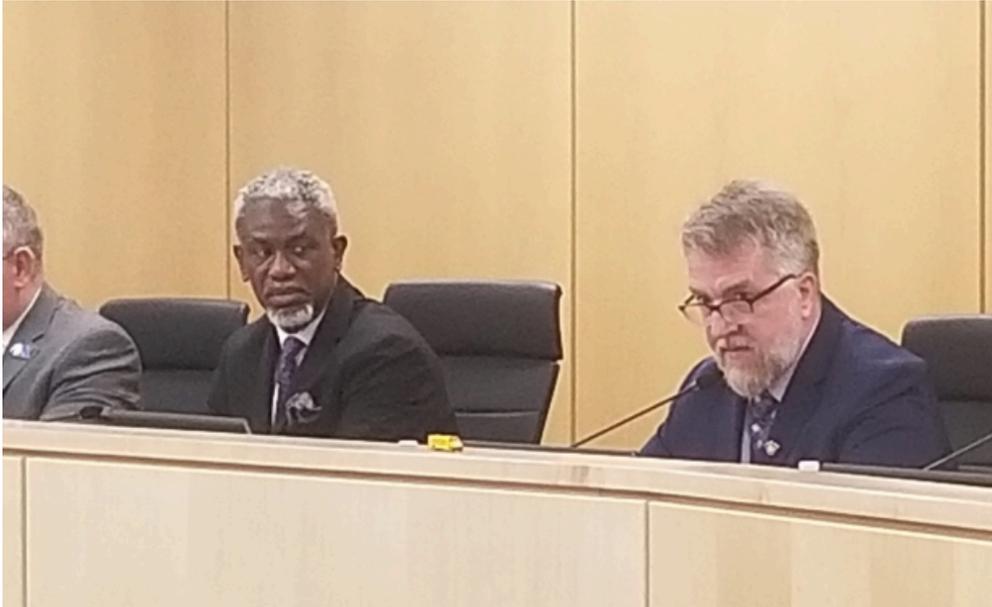
UPPER DARBY — Education professionals joined politicians and advocates Thursday morning at the Upper Darby School District administration building to speak in unified support of a proposed \$1.1 billion basic education funding increase in Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro's proposed 2024-25 budget.



Andrea Fink, president of the William Penn Education Association, left, with Linda Fox, president of the Upper Darby Education Association. (Alex Rose – Daily Times)

“Gov. Shapiro’s budget proposal takes a historic first step to fixing our unconstitutional public school funding system,” said Andrea Fink, president of the William Penn Education Association. “Pennsylvania students have waited decades for policymakers to take bold action to address the significant needs in their schools. They cannot wait any longer. We must act.”

Fink, joined by her Upper Darby counterpart, Linda Fox, said the teachers union and superintendents are on the same page in this regard and urged lawmakers from both sides of the aisle to jump on board as well.



Upper Darby School Board President Don Fields argued that disparities in education funding have forced districts with less resources to spend much more time “just treading water” and trying to get through each week than wealthier districts.

“If school districts didn’t have to focus so much on advocacy, they could spend more time and effort on education, on developing ways to better serve and teach our kids,” said Fields. “No one in education chose their career so they could spend more time in Washington or Harrisburg begging for more funding. Or having press conferences. They got into this industry to serve the public, to serve the future of their community, to make a difference. The one thing that gets in the way of making that difference is funding.”

Shapiro’s plan would put about \$1 billion into day-to-day district operations, as well as \$300 million in new spending for school repairs, \$100 million for mental health services, \$50 million for safety grants and \$20 million to recruit and retain educators as Pennsylvania faces a critical teacher shortage. He is also proposing a cybercharter school tuition rate of \$8,000 per student, which is expected to save school districts about \$262 million total.

The funding would be drawn from the state’s \$14 billion surplus as part of what Shapiro acknowledged during a budget address last month is an “ambitious” outlay for Pennsylvania finances over the next fiscal year beginning July 1. The proposal represents about a 14% increase over current basic education funding.



State Reps. Heather Boyd, left, and Gina Curry, are both former UDSD board members. Boyd said of Shapiro's proposed budget, "I'm going to vote for it if it's in front of me. I'm ready to say yes." (ALEX ROSE – DAILY TIMES)

Educators say it is sorely needed after decades of underinvestment in public schools that have also been saddled with an onslaught of unfunded mandates, driving up costs and driving out teachers.

"I would argue that we are operating some of the most complex organizations in this country, and we are expected to meet every new regulation and mandate without the proper funding and support," said Upper Darby School District Superintendent Dr. Daniel McGarry.

Norristown Area School District Superintendent Christopher Dormer said he often hears from legislators who say they are tired of hearing about problems and want to hear about solutions.



Norristown Area School District Superintendent Christopher Dormer, says, "Funding makes a tangible difference in the lives of our students, in the quality of the programs, materials and supports and environments that we can provide." (ALEX ROSE – DAILY TIMES)

"My response to them is: Solutions require money. Full stop," he said. "Funding makes a tangible difference in the lives of our students, in the quality of the programs, materials and supports and environments that we can provide, as well as the volume of opportunities that we can provide to our students."

Dormer said the state's charter school law must also be amended to address overpayments of cybercharters serving students from different districts at variable rates. He compared it to customers at a restaurant being charged wildly varying prices for the same hamburger based on nothing but their ZIP code.

Dr. Maria Edelberg, executive director of the Delaware County Intermediate Unit, noted the budget proposal includes increased funding for career and technical education critical for trade and infrastructure jobs.

She said it is equally imperative that the state fund preschool and early childhood education, where resources are often low and needs have skyrocketed.

"Just for the Delaware County Intermediate Unit alone, we have seen a 30% increase in students entering our early intervention program," she said. "In the 2021-22 school year, we serviced 2,160 children with special needs. This year, we are anticipating serving 3,083 students in special education. These are 3-to-5-year-olds."

Of like minds

Many of those gathered Thursday pointed to a Supreme Court ruling last year that found Pennsylvania had failed to meet a constitutional obligation to provide a fair and adequate education to all children, saying this was a step in the right direction.

“We have waited 10 years for this ruling, and yet today we are still standing ... and fighting to ensure that our students get what they rightfully deserve: An adequate funding for basic education” said Dr. Eric Becoats, superintendent of the William Penn School District, which was a plaintiff in that lawsuit. “There is hope that the recommendation of the Basic Education Funding Commission and Gov. Shapiro’s proposed budget will chart a new historic course for our schools. This can only be accomplished, though, if our state legislators pass this budget in full and complete form. It is imperative for our students, our teachers and our staff, and our families and our communities. We can no longer get by with less, or do more with less.”

State Rep. Heather Boyd, D-163, a former Upper Darby School Board member, said she remembered advocating for increased funding when her kids were aged 2 and 5. They are now 13 and 16, and the older one will have his entire public education underfunded, she said.

“When the governor said \$1.1 billion, I screamed,” she said. “That room was echoing with screams because all of you remember the \$1 billion cuts two governors ago that we are still feeling the pain from. It is still hurting us. ... So I hear that number and I’m excited, I’m going to vote for it if it’s in front of me. I’m ready to say yes.”

Boyd cautioned that there has to also be a commitment to an overarching \$5.4 billion seven-year plan to close the education funding gap, or educators and politicians will find themselves back where they are now before too long.

State Rep. Gina Curry, D-164, Upper Darby, a fellow former Upper Darby School Board member, pointed out that this budget, if passed, would have impacts further than simply Delaware County.

“We are trying to have a bipartisan effort to get this budget passed,” she said. “We are proud to stand in the Legislature as former school board directors and parents right here in this district to be able to get this budget passed. Because it makes sense, it is a budget that is going to impact our districts in such a way — our districts down here on the southeastern side of the commonwealth — but not only that, our rural districts that many people don’t talk about where there’s no access and very little money.”

“We have a tagline in Upper Darby, you walked right through it when you walked into this room: Opportunity, unity and excellence,” said McGarry. “It’s not a joke. Our goal in the Upper Darby School District is to provide every opportunity for all of our students to be unified in their ability to pursue excellence. Adequate allocation of funding will assist in removing barriers so our talented and dedicated teachers can support students in reaching that goal, that tagline.”

2024 > March > 22