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FEATURED

Pa. education secretary's visit to Pottstown focuses on fair funding, charter tuition reform

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Pennsylvania Education Secretary Pedro Rivera, standing, joins Pottstown Schools Superintendent Stephen Rodriguez.

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POTTSTOWN — When it comes to advocating for fair public school funding, Pedro Rivera is playing the long game.

Rivera, who has been Gov. Tom Wolf's education secretary for six years, knows only too well the struggles urban schools like Pottstown face under Pennsylvania's nationally recognized imbalanced funding system.

Although Pennsylvania adopted a formula for funding public schools more fairly — adjusting for things like local tax effort and poverty levels — nearly 90 percent of education funding still gets distributed outside that formula.

As a result, despite the adoption of the formula, this practice has left Pennsylvania with the dubious distinction of having one of the most inequitable public education funding systems in the nation, creating the widest funding gaps between rich and poor districts.

Worse yet, research by fair funding education advocates has demonstrated that the more white students a district has, the more funding it gets on a per-student basis.

Each year, that disparity grows, despite additional money being put into the education budget. Please support your area's best source of local journalism. [Already a Subscriber? Log in](#) [x](#)
Stephen Rodriguez. "The pizza is getting bigger, but our slice keeps getting

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smaller."

"At this rate, districts like Pottstown will never catch up," said Lawrence Feinberg, a member of the Haverford School board for more than 20 years and a long-time fair funding advocate.

During an interview with MediaNews Group Friday, Rivera, a former Lancaster Schools Superintendent, said the surest way to convince legislators to route more than just 11 percent of the state's education budget through the fair funding formula is for them to reach that conclusion on their own.

"I've often asked myself, 'how do they come up with a policy?' and I've come to learn that sometimes, it's based on a very small granule of information," Rivera said.

"So we've moved away from 'recommending' and moved toward 'educating,'" said Rivera. "We're having lots of conversations with legislators on a number of subjects and, over the years, we've established credibility," said Rivera.

That approach helped convince the General Assembly to reduce standardized testing time without sacrificing rigor, and to change unpopular and inefficient statewide graduation requirements, he said.

But Rivera said he recognizes that taking five years to establish credibility means five years that students in underfunded districts like Pottstown have gone without resources enjoyed by the students in neighboring school districts, neighbors against whom they will compete for jobs in the 21st- century economy.

Were the formula to be implemented for all education funding, Pottstown Schools would be receiving an additional \$13 million in state aid, money, Rodríguez says, that would be used to update, upgrade and maintain facilities, add programs and reduce property taxes.

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Pottstown Schools Superintendent Stephen Rodriguez, standing, introduces Pennsylvania Education Secretary, Pedro Rivera, lower left, to a roundtable discussion Friday in the district's Beech Street Learning Studio.

Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group

State Sen. Bob Mensch, R-24th Dist., told a roundtable of students, parents, educators and school board members convened for Rivera's visit, that adopting the formula for all funding would mean districts represented by powerful legislative leaders would lose state aid to provide it to needier districts — and that is a difficult political calculus to overcome.

"I wish I had a better answer for you. If it were fully implemented, it would provide a good deal of relief to

Pottstown," said Mensch. "But it's not like we have \$100 million sitting around doing nothing."

That is certainly true.

According to an Associated Press story published in Friday's edition of The Mercury, the legislature has \$172 million in a surplus fund sitting around doing nothing. The money is in "the legislature's reserve for its own operations" and has continued to rise every year, according to AP.

Faced with the regional rivalry that has hamstrung efforts to move the ball on fair funding, the Wolf administration is trying to gain yards on equity one issue at a time, said Rivera.

This year's issue is charter school tuition reform and the funding formula that has not changed in 20 years. Already a Subscriber? [Log in](#)
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"This is our issue moving forward," said Rivera.

"It would be great to get fair funding implemented, that would be a touchdown for us," said Rodriguez, who is also this year's president of the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools. "It would mean an additional \$13 million in state aid every year."

"But if we can't do that, getting charter school tuition reform is a good first down," he said.

For Pottstown, it would mean an additional \$1 million to \$1.2 million back in school coffers and would go a long way to closing the \$1.5 million deficit identified Thursday as discussions on next year's budget get underway.

For the past several years, public school educators have argued that school districts that operate their own cyber-charter schools have costs of only about \$5,000 per student.

Given that cyber-charter schools do not face the brick and mortar costs of physical schools, they have argued that cost should be the basis for what cyber charters that are privately run can charge school districts for tuition.

A 172-page bill co-sponsored by state Rep. Joe Ciresi, D-146th Dist., would set that tuition rate at \$9,500 per student per year, a number Ciresi said is still too high, but which is supported by Wolf as more politically palatable.

According to figures provided by Ciresi's office, the bill would provide savings of \$914,374 for the Spring-Ford School District, where Ciresi served as a school board member; \$703,768 in savings for the Pottsgrove School District and \$509,309 for the Perkiomen Valley School District.

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The bill would also apply the same financial transparency standards to charter schools and traditional public schools, as well as creating a statewide performance standard for charter schools.



From left, Pottstown Schools Superintendent Stephen Rodriguez, Pennsylvania Education Secretary Pedro Rivera, state Rep. Joe Ciresi, D-146th Dist., Pottstown School Board member and Community Relations Director John Armato.
Emily Overdorf — For Medianews Group

"This is about responsible school choice," said Rivera. "The cost of charter school tuition is quickly outpacing the ability of school districts to generate revenues to pay for it."

That was one of the findings of a study released last year by the Temple University Center on Regional Politics called "A Tale of Haves and Have Nots." It concluded that without changing Pennsylvania's

education funding model, 60 percent of all the state's schools will be in "fiscal stress" within five years.

The report identified the primary drivers of that increasingly permanent divide between rich and poor school districts as charter school tuition, pension and special education costs.

During Friday's roundtable Maureen Jampo, business manager for Pottstown's schools, told Rivera that while "the charter school enrollment of Pottstown School District students has remained relatively flat over the past three years, the total tuition has increased an average of 20 percent per year."

She also pointed out that while the state funds special education using a formula that assigns every district a base percentage of local jurisdiction of 1.6 percent.

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But with more than 800 students identified as having special education needs, the actual percentage in Pottstown is closer to 23 percent, making yet another way Harrisburg's formulas fail to fund Pottstown schools fairly, she said.

Funding special education based on the actual number of special education students in Pottstown would save its taxpayers \$6,500 per student every year.

With 43 of its approximately 800 special education students enrolled in charter schools, a change in the formula means the savings of \$6,500 per student would save Pottstown taxpayers more than a half-million dollars a year, said Jampo.

"That denominator is exasperating," said Rivera. "The formula creates inequity. We need to create the same playing field for every one."

After the hour-long roundtable, Rivera toured Pottstown High School.



Pottstown High School students, from left, senior David Wallace, senior Thanea Revrovan, Kishan Patel and Christiana Albert, students members of the school board and student government, were invited to be part of Friday's roundtable with Pennsylvania Education Secretary Pedro Rivera. None of them got a chance to speak.

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Pottstown parent highlights cyber-charter tuition debate

"The cost of charter school tuition is quickly outpacing the ability of school districts to generate revenues to pay for it."

— Pedro Rivera, Pennsylvania Education Secretary

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Evan Brandt has been a staff reporter for The Mercury for more than 20 years. He covers municipal, school district, political, state government, federal government and environmental news.

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