

Funding Formula Blasted

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Advocates rally for Abbott schools

TRENTON — Paterson teacher Niechette Charles is seeing the fiscal impact of the state's new school funding formula firsthand.

“When we came to school this year, we found out we had no money for buses at all,” she said Monday, which meant that it would be difficult to take her high school science students to places like the Liberty Science Center, as she had done in previous years. Not only class trips, but after-school programs also were threatened under the funding formula.

That's a different educational picture than the one painted by attorneys for the state who argued before the state Supreme Court on Monday for the end of Abbott districts, which it says are no longer necessary in order to provide an equal education to all the state's children.

The 31 low-income Abbott districts, which include Paterson, Passaic and Garfield, receive additional state money to guarantee that their schools can spend as much per pupil as wealthier districts.

State lawmakers sought to end the Abbott districts with the passage of a new funding formula in January. State officials say the new formula considers at-risk students in non-Abbott districts and expands preschool access around the state, among other reforms.

Charles, a teacher at Paterson's Pre-Collegiate Teaching Academy, joined a large and vocal crowd of grandparents and education advocates who rallied outside the state Supreme Court building Monday morning in support of the Abbott rulings. Nearly 60 had boarded a bus from Paterson to Trenton, where they met up with more than 200 parents and other activists from Newark, Jersey City, Asbury Park and other New Jersey cities.

The state high court heard opposing oral arguments from state attorneys and the Education Law Center, which represents the 300,000 low-income school children covered by the Abbott v. Burke rulings. The justices are not expected to issue an opinion right away, and it is likely they will now call for a fact-finding hearing in a lower court, which can go into greater detail, and build a record of the Abbott schools' needs.

More evidence to support the Abbott academies would have to be presented, the justices suggested, in order for the court to decide whether the funding formula passed by the state Legislature in January meets the needs of the state's poor urban districts.

Paterson Board of Education President Dr. Jonathan Hodges said the funding formula is far from meeting the school district's needs. Under the current budget, Paterson is forced to make fiscal decisions between opening badly needed new schools and sustaining educational programs, he said.

“If you start a program in sixth grade, you can’t expect to continue in the seventh grade,” Hodges said. “These are the things that undermine our ability to deliver educational improvements the district needs.”

Willa Mae Taylor, Paterson school board member, said state lawyers were attempting to justify flat-funding the state’s Abbott districts. The districts received increases of at least 2 percent this year, while some suburban districts received as much as 20 percent more.

For Paterson, that translates to a total state aid amount of about \$390 million. Opponents of the new funding formula have argued that the 2 percent increase is not enough to cover the average increase in teacher salaries, in addition to rising energy costs.

“It’s still not enough,” Taylor said. “It does not permit us to have supplemental programs for the district.”

On top of the 2 percent increases included in the new funding formula, school districts were promised “adjustment aid,” designed to fill the financial gap between the amount of money districts can raise through local taxes and the amount the state has determined is their “fair share.”

Meanwhile, critics say that’s a temporary provision added to placate state legislators. As the funding flattens out, they argue districts like Paterson and Passaic will see large shortfalls.

Oversight and accountability were also an issue.

“Why should it be the responsibility of this court to make sure the districts are doing their jobs?” Justice Roberto Rivera-Soto asked David Sciarra, a lawyer for the Education Law Center, which has litigated the case for more than 30 years.

Over the years, the state high court has determined that it is the state’s responsibility to make sure funds are allocated appropriately, Sciarra responded.

“The state presents no evidence that the circumstances in the Abbott districts has changed,” Sciarra said.

James Harris, president of the New Jersey NAACP, said the Abbott mandates are as important to the Garden State as the 1954 landmark U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. (Topeka, Kan.) Board of Education* decision, which struck down school segregation.

While some parents watched the hearing, others went to the State House to meet with lawmakers about the funding formula. Assemblywoman Eleise Evans, D-Paterson, who voted against the new funding formula in January, spoke with a few parents and heard their concerns.

Parents said they were disappointed that Assemblywoman Nellie Pou, D-North Haledon, who voted in favor of the funding overhaul, was not available to meet with them.

Carol Cuadrado, Pou’s chief of staff, said over the telephone Monday that Abbott advocates never confirmed a meeting with Pou and that the assemblywoman was testifying before the Judiciary Committee before rushing off to another commitment.

On the bus back to Paterson, the group vowed to rally more community support for Abbott districts among their friends and families. They repeated a chant of one of the speakers who led the rally: “Take the money from the schools, in November you will lose.”