



EDUCATION CRISIS COSTS STUDENTS A FAIR CHANCE

By Michael J. Carroll

I have been thinking about the education crisis in Philadelphia for a long time, thinking and worrying because each year funding and support for our schools and the students in them grows worse. I have lived in Philadelphia for four decades. This is where my children attended the neighborhood public elementary school and graduated from a city public high school. Philadelphia schools gave them a chance in life. I fear that is changing. Our schools may no longer be giving our children a chance.

I know that many school districts throughout Pennsylvania are also poorly funded. They are suffering and not doing a very good job of educating their children and giving them a fighting chance in life.

I grew up in Mount Carmel in the Pennsylvania anthracite coal region. I was more than a little disturbed to read that the Mount Carmel School District, where I graduated from high school, spends less money to educate a student than any other district in the state. It is at the bottom. Dead last.

Mount Carmel High managed to nudge me out into the world four decades ago. It would never have been mistaken for a fancy suburban public, or for an elite private school (not in physical plant or in standardized test scores) but it gave me a chance. I worry that it will no longer be able to provide chances from the bottom of the funding barrel. I have the same worry about Philadelphia, a city that is not much better off and getting worse.

After Mount Carmel High I got a college degree, not of the fine, expensive variety, but a good, reasonably priced one from the state school nearest town. I took that credential to Frankford High School in Philadelphia where I student-taught. I substitute-taught for a year or two after that while trying other things. I never made teaching my life's work but I learned the value of education and the incredible importance of trying to do it properly.

I fear that students have less of a chance today than I did and less than my children did. One big reason is the way we fund our schools, or fail to, based upon real estate values and property taxes. The result is that we have extremely well-funded schools in affluent areas of Pennsylvania and

very poorly funded ones in places like Mount Carmel and Philadelphia.

Mount Carmel, like Philadelphia, has seen better financial times. The decline of mining shrunk the town from 18,000 people in 1930 to fewer than 5,000 today. In recent decades houses that were once crammed with families often came to shelter one widow until she passed on. One out of five houses is now empty. When my mother died a little over a decade ago we sold the well-maintained family home for \$23,000 and were lucky to get it. We might not be able to sell it at all today. This is not the making of a solid basis to support a school system.

Supporting schools though real estate taxes is an impossible mission in Mount Carmel and Philadelphia. This is no way to educate our young; leaving no way to give them a chance.

The educational achievement gap between rich children and poor children in this country has grown greatly over recent decades and continues to grow.

I graduated from Mount Carmel High when it was able to give me a chance. My two children attended and graduated from Philadelphia schools that gave them a chance.

Because of the lack of adequate funding, Mount Carmel, Philadelphia and poor school districts throughout the Commonwealth are no longer able to provide their students a chance for a decent, fair start in life. This is a terrible thing for the future; for them and for us all. ■

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