

FROM DOLLARS TO DIFFERENCE

HOW PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS
ARE PUTTING STATE ADEQUACY INVESTMENTS
TO GOOD USE



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A REPORT BY TEACH PLUS PA POLICY FELLOWS



Kaitlin Alsopp
Mastery Charter Schools



Meghan Amayo
North Hills School District



Eric Hitchner
(Senior Fellow)
New Foundations
Charter School



Cory Hulsizer
(Senior Fellow)
Camp Hill School District



Tarzan MacMood
School District of
Philadelphia



Kaitlin McCann
(Senior Fellow)
School District of Philadelphia



Brynn Raub
Solanco School District



Cimony St. Clair
Norwin School District



Nelson Suarez
Manheim Township
School District



Nicole Wyglendowski
(Senior Fellow)
School District of Philadelphia

"For the first time in decades, we're not just trying to survive—we're able to plan for the future. The adequacy funding has given us a foundation to build on. ... Now we're building something that can last. ... This is what it looks like to do what's best for students."

ERIE SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT BRIAN POLITO

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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, in response to a lawsuit brought by several low-wealth school districts along with a group of parents, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Pennsylvania State Conference, and the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court ruled that the commonwealth's current approach to funding public education is unconstitutional. Specifically, President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer found that the current inequitable system, which is overly reliant on local property taxes, violates the Pennsylvania constitution's education clause, which guarantees a "thorough and efficient system of public education," as well as its equal protection clause.

"Low-wealth districts," wrote Judge Jubelirer, "which struggle to raise enough revenue through local taxes to cover the greater needs of their students, lack the inputs that are essential elements of a thorough and efficient system of public education—adequate funding; courses, curricula, and other programs that prepare students to be college and career ready; sufficient, qualified, and effective staff; safe and adequate facilities; and modern, quality instrumentalities of learning." She concluded that "the current system of funding public education has disproportionately, negatively impacted students who attend schools in low-wealth school districts" and ordered the state legislature to devise a solution that would provide all students access to the educational resources they need to "succeed academically, socially, and civically."¹

The Pennsylvania General Assembly's solution came in July 2024, when bipartisan majorities in both the House and Senate codified a new methodology for calculating what the state owes underfunded districts as part of the 2024-25 state budget. The legislature calculated a total state adequacy gap of \$4.5 billion that takes into account the level of spending successful school districts in Pennsylvania invest per student, the needs of each school district based on the state's current student weights in its funding formulas, and the gap between districts' current spending and their need-based adequacy targets.

In all, 348 districts were found to have state adequacy gaps, and the state made a first installment of \$494 million in adequacy payments to districts—11 percent of the total state adequacy gap—in the 2024-25 state budget.² New research from Research for Action has found that "districts with the most inadequate funding serve students with greater needs, provide less educational opportunity, and experience worse student outcomes than districts with adequate funding."³

The Philadelphia Inquirer

NEWS

**Landmark Pa. school funding case decided:
The state's system is unconstitutional**

FIGURE 1: Geographical Distribution of Pennsylvania School Districts by Size of Per Pupil Funding Adequacy Gap, 2024



- (1) **no gap** (135 districts are adequately funded and have zero adequacy gaps),
- (2) **low gap** (91 districts with adequacy gaps between \$14-\$1,483 per pupil),
- (3) **moderate gap** (91 districts with adequacy gaps between \$1,491-\$2,842 per pupil)
- (4) **high gap** (91 districts with adequacy gaps between \$2,851-\$4,064 per pupil),
- (5) **very high gap** (91 districts with adequacy gaps between \$4,074-\$13,035 per pupil)

Map courtesy of Research for Action



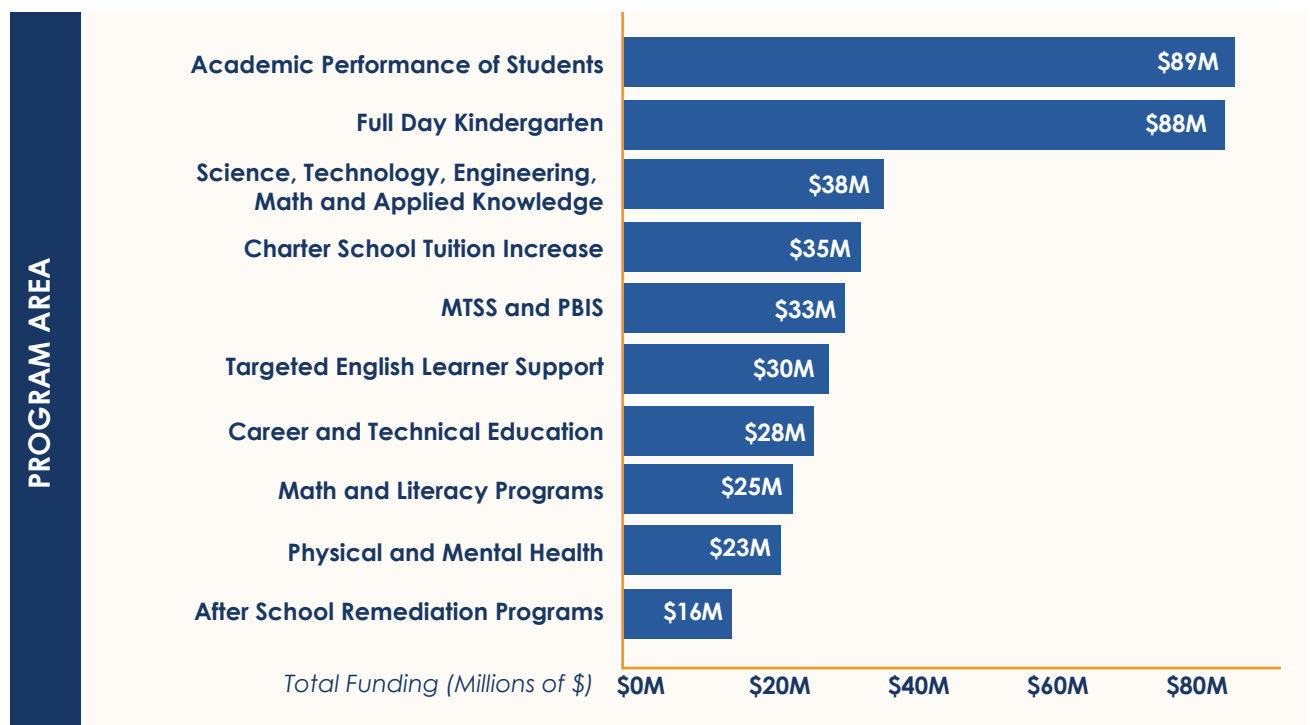
Research has shown that increased school funding leads to improved student outcomes and that students—including low-income students—do better academically when they attend better-funded schools. Additionally, national school funding data shows that when school districts are given more money, they tend to spend it in ways that the research shows increases student outcomes.⁴

However, in the wake of this historic adequacy investment, many Pennsylvania lawmakers have wanted more specific and localized information: How are school districts putting the first installment of this new money to good use to benefit students?

To provide accountability for new state dollars, the legislature required districts receiving adequacy funding through the Ready to Learn block grant to report to the Pennsylvania Department of Education how they planned to spend these dollars. According to data released by Governor Josh Shapiro's office, districts reported using these dollars in a variety of ways in accordance with the allowable uses included in legislation, such as establish new programming, expand programming, or maintain existing programming that would otherwise face cuts (likely due to the expiration of federal Covid funds).

The top category of planned spending reported was “academic performance of students.” This included personnel costs for teachers, instructional coaches, reading/math specialists, and intervention staff; intervention and support services for struggling students; and supplemental resources such as curriculum and software. The top 10 reported categories of spending are shown in the bar chart below.⁵

FIGURE 2: Top 10 Funded Program Areas Using Adequacy Dollars



Information provided by Governor Josh Shapiro's office based on PA Department of Education data

To supplement the numeric and basic descriptive information that districts submitted to the state, we wanted to go deeper with a small subset of districts receiving adequacy funding to understand what these new dollars truly mean for students in their schools. To do this, we, as educators and Teach Plus PA Policy Fellows, interviewed superintendents and other school staff in seven school districts to collect their stories: New Kensington-Arnold, Erie, Pottstown, Jeannette City, Kane Area, Norristown Area, and Philadelphia. As is true of the entire set of 348 districts receiving adequacy funding, the districts profiled here represent a wide range of sizes and geographies in rural, suburban, and urban settings.

While each district has used its new state funding in unique ways that meet the specific needs of its local communities, we found many commonalities across these case studies and recommend action by the Pennsylvania General Assembly.



FINDINGS:

Adequacy funds and other state funding increases allowed districts to make new investments in staffing, instructional materials, professional development, interventions, and new programs that will have a direct impact on student achievement and well-being.

State education funding increases have helped mitigate the expiration of federal Covid funds in Pennsylvania, allowing districts to avoid the fiscal cliffs, mass layoffs, and program cuts that many districts across the country face.

While state testing data is not yet available for the first school year in which adequacy funds have reached districts, schools are already seeing early evidence of positive impacts on students in the form of improved attendance, disciplinary outcomes, and formative academic data.

While the first round of adequacy funding has provided critical resources for historically underfunded districts, more is needed: Districts continue to face fiscal pressures from rising cyber charter costs, inflation, additional loss of federal funding, and other mandated costs such as special education. If the state does not fulfill its obligation to close the remaining 89 percent of its overall adequacy gap in a timely manner and find ways to deliver other funding increases and savings, many districts face the specter of raising local property taxes or cutting programs and staff to make ends meet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Continue to invest at least \$500 million per year in adequacy funding until the remaining \$4 billion state adequacy gap is closed.

2

Commit to a clear timeline for closing the adequacy gap.

3

Follow through on other state funding increases and cost saving measures to benefit all school districts.

We are a group of Teach Plus PA Policy Fellows from across Pennsylvania. We teach elementary, middle, and high school in district and charter schools all over the commonwealth. Many of us teach in inadequately funded districts, while others teach in well-funded schools. We all have seen firsthand the way school funding—or lack thereof—impacts students and the opportunities schools are able to offer them. We are inspired by how the educators we interviewed, like those all over Pennsylvania, are wisely using new, long-needed state funds to improve the quality of education they're able to offer their students. Their stories reveal the real, tangible benefits this new method of funding Pennsylvania's schools has already started to produce and offer a glimpse of what districts across the state will be able to do if the legislature continues to make good on its constitutional obligations to students.



New Kensington-Arnold School District



Superintendent: Dr. Christopher Sefcheck

FAST FACTS

NEW KENSINGTON-ARNOLD SCHOOL DISTRICT in southwestern PA

District Locale: Suburban	Schools: 5
Students: 1,950	Qualify for special education: 25%
Multilingual learners: 0.9%	Economically disadvantaged: 70%

Located in northern Westmoreland County, the suburban New Kensington-Arnold School District serves just over 1,900 students across four brick-and-mortar schools and a cyber school. 25 percent of students qualify for special education, 59 percent are people of color, and 70 percent are classified as economically disadvantaged.⁶ The district's recent academic progress, coming on the heels of \$1.2 million in new adequacy funding, has attracted regional attention and news coverage.⁷

Adequacy funding builds upon recent funding increases that have allowed the district to make dramatic improvements in student support services. Historically, the district employed only two guidance counselors, both assigned to the high school. As of the 2024-25 school year, the district employs counselors at all grade levels with the support of adequacy funds, and Superintendent Chris Sefcheck is seeing the benefits of this added support. For example, he credited Stephanie Gardlock, a counselor at Roy A. Hunt Elementary School, for building strong connections with students, leading to higher attendance and test participation rates and skyrocketing student achievement. **"Ms. Gardlock is a driving force behind the positive momentum in the district,"** said Dr. Sefcheck, citing the counselor's ability to develop relationships and teach mindfulness to her upper-elementary students.

Gardlock, a proud graduate of the New Kensington-Arnold School District, attributes recent improvements at Roy A. Hunt Elementary School to an increased focus on mental health and trauma-informed training. She believes there is a strong connection between addressing students' mental health needs and their academic success. Currently responsible for over 650 students—more than double the American School Counselor Association's recommended caseload of 250—Gardlock underscores the district's ongoing need for additional support staff, which she views as critical to student achievement. She is confident that increased funding through the adequacy supplement would bring essential resources not only to the counseling department but also to areas such as physical education and recess. **"At my school, our students just play in a grass field,"** Gardlock shared. **"At our other elementary school, they have a basketball court, but neither has any playground equipment—unless teachers buy it themselves. Recess is so important for kids this age; it makes a real difference in their day."**

In addition to counselors, new funds have allowed the district to hire a behavior specialist and a cyber school director. The district is also utilizing innovative scheduling and educational tools to meet individual student needs. In 2024-25, the district started a daily WIN (What I Need) period, in which math and reading specialists work with students to address specific learning needs. Programs like *Smart Futures* and *Firefly* are being used for instructional interventions and test readiness, while students in grades 3-12 additionally have access to tutoring.



New Ken-Arnold's Roy A. Hunt Elementary showing academic improvement for 1st time in a decade

New Kensington-Arnold established a partnership with Pittsburgh Area Community Schools (PACS), which provides twice-weekly support for attendance. An attendance specialist helps to identify truancy cases, and then home visits are made to provide necessary support. Adequacy funding is helping the district sustain these new staff positions and interventions, which have yielded impressive student achievement gains. **"Roy A. Hunt Elementary School has been removed from the school improvement list for the first time in 10 years,"** said Dr. Sefcheck.

According to state data, Hunt students exceeded the statewide average by four percentage points in reading and achieved a 79 percent growth score. In math, the school's 94 percent academic growth score was well above the statewide average of 75 percent. In addition, four Hunt teachers were recognized for being in the top 15 percent of Pennsylvania teachers for student academic growth. Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) results are also showing tremendous growth districtwide.⁸

Dr. Sefcheck credits the entirety of the staff for the improvement of the district. These school improvements are reverberating throughout the community, too: This year, property assessments rose for the first time in 20 years, he said.

If the state continues to close its share of New Kensington-Arnold's remaining adequacy gap, which is nearly \$10 million, the superintendent said he would increase academic coaches and establish co-teaching models across the curriculum. All students would have more personalized learning, as a result.

But these future aspirations can only become reality if the state fulfills its constitutional obligation to close its adequacy gap within a reasonable period of time. Rising cyber charter school expenses cost the district \$2 million annually. While an in-district cyber option and a state cyber reimbursement in last year's budget have helped, cyber charter expenses still put pressure on the district's finances, and the governor's proposed fixed cyber charter tuition rate would provide much-needed long-term savings. Without these measures, the district faces a projected shortfall in its general fund and will have to choose between dipping into its reserves or cutting costs. Given that the district's biggest expense is personnel, budget cuts would directly threaten the district's recent growth, made possible through new guidance and intervention support staff.

On the other hand, if the New Kensington-Arnold School District's full state adequacy gap were closed, Dr. Sefcheck said, **"We could compete with top schools in the region."** He is counting on state legislators to make the right choice so he can continue to deliver for students in his community.



Erie City School District



Superintendent: Mr. Brian Polito

FAST FACTS

ERIE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT in northwestern PA

District Locale: Urban	Schools: 16
Students: 10,493	Qualify for special education: 23%
Multilingual learners: 11%	Economically disadvantaged: 89%

Erie School District, an urban district in northwestern Pennsylvania serving over 10,000 students in 15 buildings plus a cyber academy and intervention center,⁹ has long been one of the most underfunded districts in the commonwealth.¹⁰ For years, the district was forced to make impossible choices—cutting staff, eliminating programs, and closing schools—just to stay operational. The recent infusion of state adequacy funding has not only stabilized the district, but has allowed it to sustain evidence-based investments that are already producing measurable outcomes for students, staff, and the community. **“For the first time in decades, we’re not just trying to survive—we’re able to plan for the future,”** said Superintendent Brian Polito. **“The adequacy funding has given us a foundation to build on.”**

In 2011-12, facing a multimillion-dollar deficit, Erie closed schools, eliminated 250 full-time positions, and cut central administration in half. By 2015, when Polito joined the district as chief financial officer—two years before becoming superintendent—there was virtually nothing left to cut.

At the time, Erie was spending far less per pupil than surrounding districts, despite serving a student population with more complex needs. Eighty-nine percent of students are economically disadvantaged, 23 percent in special education, over 10 percent are multilingual learners,¹¹ and the district contains the poorest zip code in America.¹² **“The disparity here [between low-wealth and high-wealth districts] is pretty extreme, [and] it causes a lot of challenges,”** Polito said. **“People don’t understand what [state underfunding] has done over the years. They wonder, ‘What’s going on with the city?’ The narrative needs to change from the failing urban school district, to a district that has been starved of funding for years.”**

In 2017, a recurring \$14 million increase in state subsidy, made possible through community advocacy, stabilized the budget and allowed the district to begin reinvesting in critical areas such as curriculum, facilities, and student support.¹³

Then, federal Covid stimulus funds gave Erie schools another much-needed boost, allowing the district to expand after-school and summer learning programs and hire mental health professionals, behavioral specialists, and case managers. These supports made a real difference for students, but the funding was temporary. When those stimulus dollars ran out, \$11 million in state adequacy funds in 2024-25 allowed Erie to not only maintain essential supports but to continue growing in strategic, sustainable ways. **"The stimulus money helped us patch holes—but the adequacy funding lets us lay bricks,"** said Polito. **"Now we're building something that can last."**

Today, thanks to funding increases, the district has 850 teachers and has steadily reduced turnover and reliance on emergency-certified teachers, particularly in high-need schools. For the 2024-25 school year, all vacancies were filled, even in high-poverty schools, following a teacher salary increase that made Erie competitive with neighboring districts. This salary increase was funded in part through \$6 million in state adequacy funds. **"Once teachers were given what they needed—curriculum, student supports, financial stability—the district saw a real shift,"** Polito said. **"This is what it looks like to do what's best for students."**

Another major part of Erie's transformation was the expansion of its community schools initiative, launched in 2015 in partnership with United Way. The program started in five schools and expanded to all elementary schools with the help of Covid stimulus funds. Today, support of corporate and philanthropic partners continues to fund these schools, with plans underway to expand to the high school. Each building now has a community school director who serves as a critical connector—linking families to services like food, clothing, housing, health care, and more. Community schools have also played a vital role in reducing teacher turnover, especially in schools serving the highest-need populations. **"We're not just building systems around students,"** said Polito. **"We're building systems around families, neighborhoods, and our entire community."**



Thanks to multiple years of investments in curriculum, staffing, and student supports, Erie's students are making impressive gains. Three years ago, Erie ranked in the top 10 schools statewide for PSSA math and English language arts (ELA) growth, and two years ago, the district was again in the top 10 schools for math growth and the top 30 percent for ELA growth, Polito said. The high school has seen consistent improvements in graduation rates in the 2023-24 school year. **"This kind of consistent academic improvement, across grade levels and buildings, is unprecedented for Erie,"** said Polito. **"It's the result of better curriculum, more supports for students, and time for teachers to implement with fidelity."** These gains are particularly meaningful because they've occurred despite grappling with greater student needs post-pandemic, he added.



Skilled Workforce: Learning trades at Erie High School

It's still early for data around some of the newest reforms, like curriculum implementation. This year's third graders are the first cohort to have experienced Erie's new curriculum since kindergarten without any disruption from remote learning. As that cohort progresses, Polito said he expects to see greater, more measurable gains.

If the state continues to close Erie's remaining \$91 million gap, the district will be able to stay the course with personnel and programming long enough to see these gains. In addition, the district has aspirations to restore school libraries, expand pre-kindergarten across all elementary schools, and lower class sizes. The district is also experiencing an increase in students with more complex needs, including students who are refugees, those with multiple disabilities or medical needs, and students with mental health needs; the district is expanding its self-contained classrooms and in-house programming as out-of-district placements are oversubscribed.

Adequacy funding has started to make differences not just in test scores or budgets, but in hope, trust, and momentum. **"Erie no longer needs to be the poster child for underfunded urban districts,"** Polito said. **"With consistent annual budget increases, Erie can become a model for what's possible when resources match the responsibility we have to our students."**

Pottstown School District



Superintendent: Mr. Stephen Rodriguez

FAST FACTS

POTTSTOWN SCHOOL DISTRICT in southeastern PA

District Locale: Suburban	Schools: 6
Students: 3,310	Qualify for special education: 24%
Multilingual learners: 4%	Economically disadvantaged: 78%

Located in southeastern Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia, the Pottstown School District is a suburban district educating over 3,000 students across six schools, where 78 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, 24 percent qualify for special education, four percent are multilingual learners, and 70 percent are people of color.¹⁴ The local community is relatively poor, with a median household income of \$56,174, but the district's local property tax burden is one of the highest in the commonwealth as a result of the community taxing itself at very high rates to try to make up for inadequate state funding.

Stephen Rodriguez, who has served as superintendent since 2016, believes that **"we need a good education system to have a good economic system. We need to be thoughtful about what really matters."** As a result of the General Assembly's new investments in the 2024-25 state budget to address the school funding lawsuit, Pottstown received \$892,000 in new adequacy funding, over \$1 million in tax equity funding, and more than \$1 million in new basic education funding. This new funding has been paramount in maintaining and expanding both personnel and programming.

Adequacy funds allowed the district to maintain an assistant principal for each grade level at the middle school, an investment first made possible through federal Covid dollars. After three years of this structure, the district has recorded a decrease in frequency and severity of school-based violent incidents, Rodriguez said. Rather than the first fight of the year on the second day of school, there were no recorded fights until the second week of October in 2024. The addition of counselors has also contributed to this growth in conflict resolution and student well-being. Pottstown acquired four new counselors, bringing its total to eight counselors district-wide, providing mental health supports and social emotional learning, as well as college and career readiness services.

The district has also worked to improve student well-being and behavior through investment in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). The district hired nine of its most effective teachers as MTSS program coordinators and coaches and purchased LinkIt!, leading data analytics software that helps identify students in need of support along with MTSS solutions.

Rodriguez, along with the Pottstown community, understands the need to prioritize student achievement, so the district has invested in high quality, evidence-based curriculum. Teachers and students now utilize structured literacy programs like Lexia and Foundations to teach in alignment with the science of reading. Teachers are also using programs like Dreambox and Reflex Math with higher fidelity, since the district has also been able to purchase supplemental materials, such as student workbooks and online tools, for the first time.

New state investments have also allowed for recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff. In the midst of a nationwide teaching shortage, Rodriguez's mantra of **"If you pay them, they will come"** is more relevant than ever. Pottstown teacher salaries were once almost \$20,000 below the starting salary of the area's average; now, they are only about \$3,000 below surrounding districts, allowing Pottstown to more competitively advertise open positions. The district has also hired additional paraprofessionals and 14 permanent building substitute teachers, reducing the need for combined classes and providing more stability and continuity for students.

While there is still more progress needed, Pottstown School District's student outcome measures are trending upward thanks to investments in high-quality curriculum and training. For example, last year's kindergarteners started the year with only 40 percent performing at or above benchmark in reading. By the end of last school year, 58 percent were at or above benchmark. Similar gains were observed in math, and this year's data is even more promising as of mid-year 2024-25. In a district where 70 percent of students identify as people of color, Rodriguez says this progress has provided palpable hope for students and staff: **"Can Black and brown students learn when given the proper resources? Yes!"**



May 15 Town Hall in Pottstown to explain school underfunding's impact on local taxes

The fight for fair funding, local tax relief continues in Harrisburg

While new state investments are yielding results, the district's progress is precarious. With rising costs for transportation, special education, charter schools, and utilities—coupled with the loss of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds—Pottstown is now at what Rodriguez called the **"precipice of cost vs. support."** For the first time, the district is experiencing a \$6 million budget deficit and facing the choice between dipping into budgetary reserves, cutting programs or staff, or raising local taxes. One reason for the projected deficit is that the district does not know if it can count on continued adequacy increases without a timeline or commitment from the General Assembly; its 2025-26 budget, which must be passed before the state budget is finalized, only assumes 50 percent of the governor's proposed education increases.

To those who might question why the district is facing financial challenges despite last year's funding increases, Rodriguez said, **"You can't start off 25 miles behind in a race, get a brand new pair of sneakers, and expect to be at the front of the pack."** While recent state investments have allowed the district to implement numerous impactful initiatives to benefit students, the district has been chronically underfunded for decades. With only 11 percent of Pottstown's state adequacy gap closed, the remaining gap is over \$7 million—more than its current deficit.

In order for Pottstown School District to continue its efforts, said Rodriguez, it is imperative that a long-term state plan for equitable funding be implemented. With additional resources, the district would have what it needs to maintain its current staffing and programming, invest in career and technical education (CTE) and library programs, continue to improve staff salaries, and make general overall improvements to students' learning conditions. The district would also be able to better maintain and upgrade facilities, which need heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) repair, mechanical upgrades, plumbing repairs, window replacement, masonry repairs, asbestos abatement, and cosmetic upgrades such as paint, carpeting, and flooring.

"With a long-term adequacy plan, I would be able to better plan for students to get what they need," said Rodriguez. **"The state knows who needs the money."**

Jeannette City School District



Superintendent: Mr. Matthew Jones

FAST FACTS

JEANNETTE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT in southwestern PA

District Locale: Suburban	Schools: 2
Students: 934	Qualify for special education: 25%
Multilingual learners: 0.8%	Economically disadvantaged: 75%

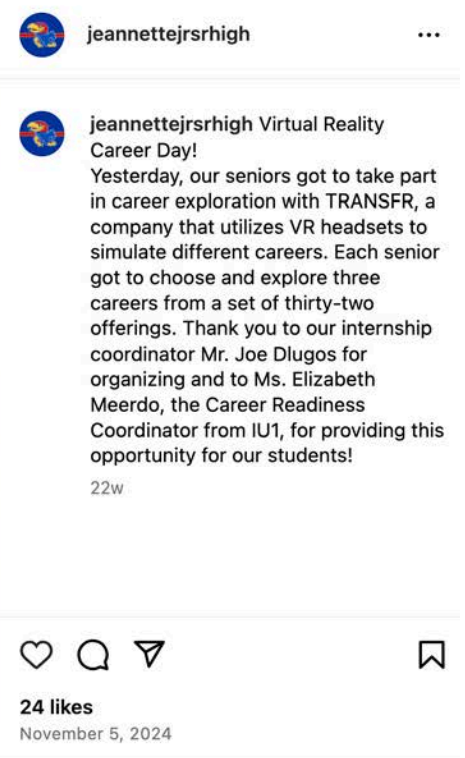
Jeannette City School District, a suburban district located in Westmoreland County east of Pittsburgh, serves a diverse and high-need student population. Enrolling approximately 900 students across its elementary and junior-senior high schools, the district has a population with over 75 percent of students considered economically disadvantaged and 25 percent qualifying for special education.¹⁵ Additionally, the district is experiencing a growing proportion of students of color, with over 40 percent of students identifying as non-white, reflecting the broader demographic shifts in the community. One in four students qualify for special education services.

The district has long faced significant funding challenges and was previously identified as a Level Up district, ranking among Pennsylvania's 100 most underfunded districts. However, with the infusion of new state adequacy funding, Superintendent Matthew Jones reported that the district has been able to make transformative investments that directly support students and educators. The district received approximately \$575,000 in adequacy funding in the 2024-25 state budget—a first installment toward closing a total \$5.3 million state adequacy gap.



One of the most impactful investments Jeannette City has made with new state funds is teacher professional learning, Jones said. Research shows that high-quality instruction is the key to student success; to that end, to ensure that educators have the tools they need, the district has funded a K-12 instructional coach. According to Jones: **"This role provides job-embedded support, helping teachers refine instructional strategies, analyze student performance data, and implement evidence-based teaching practices. The impact is already evident—teachers feel more equipped to meet student needs, and students are more engaged in learning."**

In addition to supporting teachers, the district has invested in staffing during the 2024-25 school year to support students facing barriers to success. The district recently introduced a dean of students at the junior-senior high school. This role is essential in coordinating after-school tutoring and academic interventions to ensure that students who have fallen behind academically, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, receive critical remediation and individualized support. The dean is also tackling chronic absenteeism, ensuring every student has access to the resources necessary for success.



Additionally, the district expanded career-readiness opportunities by funding a full-time internship and transition coordinator at Jeannette High School. This new staff member connects students with real-world learning experiences, internships, and job-shadowing opportunities, preparing them for post-secondary education and careers. Building these bridges between school and the workforce equips students with the skills and career opportunities needed to thrive beyond graduation, Jones said.

Finally, the district dedicated funds to credit-recovery programs, ensuring that students who struggle academically stay on track for graduation. These programs provide flexible learning options, targeted instruction, and online coursework to help students regain lost credits and achieve their academic goals. Additionally, the district's summer school program for K-8 students, launching in 2025, will prevent learning loss and provide enrichment opportunities that reinforce key skills and set students up for success.

Looking ahead, Jones is excited to debut Advanced Placement (AP) courses at the high school beginning in 2025-26, providing students with access to AP math courses, with plans to expand into additional AP math and science courses the following year. These rigorous, college-level courses will challenge students academically and provide them with opportunities to earn college credit, broadening their future educational prospects, Jones said.

The investments made possible with adequacy funding are already yielding positive outcomes, with teachers reporting greater confidence in their instruction and students receiving more personalized support. Moving forward, Jeannette City School District remains committed to leveraging funding opportunities to sustain and expand these initiatives, ensuring that every student can reach their full potential. By prioritizing professional learning, career readiness, credit recovery, summer school, and AP course expansion, Superintendent Jones and Jeannette educators are making a lasting investment in the future of their students and the strength of the Jeannette community.



Kane Area School District



Superintendent: Mrs. Jeannine Kloss

FAST FACTS

KANE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT in northwestern PA

District Locale: Rural	Schools: 3
Students: 941	Qualify for special education: 18%
Multilingual learners: 0%	Economically disadvantaged: 57%

Students in the Kane Area School District (KASD) are reaping the benefits of additional state investments during the 2024-25 school year. This rural school district, located in northwestern Pennsylvania and serving southwestern McKean and Elk counties, educates just under 1,000 students—57 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged and 18 percent of whom qualify for special education—across three schools.¹⁶ The district received approximately \$465,000 in adequacy funding this year. It has devoted its new adequacy funds and other state funding increases to improved student support services, reduced class size, and research-based professional development. Superintendent Jeannine Kloss said, **"Our investments directly target critical areas to support student learning, structured literacy, class size reduction, STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] curriculum resources and materials, career readiness, and academic interventions."**

Kloss' first priority for adequacy funding was maintaining critical support positions for students in the elementary school. For example, the district had to eliminate an elementary academic interventionist position at the end of the 2022-23 school year for budgetary reasons. The new adequacy funds allowed the district to reinstate this position, allowing more students to receive targeted small-group instruction in reading and math. Additionally, before the adequacy funding came through, the district had expected to eliminate an elementary teaching position in 2024-25 due to budgetary constraints by not filling a position left vacant by a teacher retirement. With the adequacy funding included in the state budget, the district was able to avoid this staffing reduction and keep class sizes smaller. Maintaining small class sizes is a research-based strategy for improving student achievement, allowing for more individualized instruction and fostering stronger readers and critical thinkers, Kloss said.

At the secondary school level, the district was able to add new support staff roles including an additional paraprofessional to support students with disabilities, a half-time librarian, and a part-time career mentor. These roles provide students with increased academic and career-readiness support as they transition out of high school. The district has also been able to provide after-school tutoring services to middle and high school students.



While educators are the backbone of education, Kloss recognizes that quality resources and training are also essential. The district invested a significant portion of its adequacy funding on new curricular materials for science and math. Funds were also used to provide professional development on structured literacy. Ensuring that teachers are engaging in best practices and have access to quality curriculum is a winning combination for positive student success, she added.

The impact of these investments are already showing positive outcomes. In all three of the district's schools, daily attendance in the 2024-25 school year is over 95 percent, an increase of three to six percentage points from the previous year at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Behavior referrals are also down across all three schools since the beginning of the school year. Most notably, the middle school has a 55 percent reduction in discipline referrals from the first to the second quarter of the 2024-25 year. Increased classroom time with fewer disruptions is helping students stay engaged and succeed academically, Kloss said.

While the adequacy funding in 2024 provided a much-needed boost, the one-year installment has not eliminated all financial pressures on the district. KASD continues to struggle with rising cyber charter school costs; the district currently pays out five percent of its budget, approximately \$1 million, to cyber charter schools. Reflecting on the 2024-25 state budget, Kloss lamented that serious cyber charter funding reform was not taken. If Governor Shapiro's proposed cyber reforms are passed in the 2025-26 state budget, it would save the district more than \$300,000 per year, she said.

Provided that the state legislature continues to close the district's remaining adequacy gap, Kloss and Kane Area Elementary School Principal Shannon Olson have plans to further expand curriculum and career readiness. The district used some of its federal Covid dollars to invest in a STEM program for the middle and high schools. Additional adequacy funding would be used to bridge this successful program to the elementary school, which would require funding to purchase curriculum and equipment, as well as hire staff. This financial commitment won't be taken lightly and can only occur if the state commits to a funding plan.

Kloss stressed the importance of ongoing state investment: **"Continued funding ensures that students will receive the high-quality education they deserve while helping the district avoid further staffing reductions that could negatively impact learning."**

Norristown Area School District



Superintendent: Mr. Christopher Dormer

FAST FACTS

NORRISTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT in southeastern PA

District Locale: Suburban	Schools: 12
Students: 7,675	Qualify for special education: 18%
Multilingual learners: 22%	Economically disadvantaged: 73%

Located in Montgomery County, Norristown Area School District is a suburban district serving the municipalities of East Norriton Township, Norristown Borough, and West Norriton Township. The district serves 7,675 students, 73 percent of whom are classified as economically disadvantaged, across 12 schools. The student body is racially diverse: 50 percent Hispanic, 30 percent Black, 11 percent white, 9 percent multi-racial, and 1 percent Asian. In a significant shift over the past two years, the multilingual learner student population—22 percent of district students—has surpassed the special education student population—18 percent—for the first time in the district's history.¹⁷

For years, Norristown's homeowners bore the financial burden of an underfunded school district. With a limited commercial tax base and insufficient state investment, local property taxes increased by 40 percent in a short period of time to make up the shortfall. However, increased state funding—from the Level Up program, increases to basic and special education funding, and new adequacy investments—has halted this trend. **"For the past four years, Norristown has not had to raise local taxes, allowing residents to remain in their homes without additional financial strain,"** said Superintendent Chris Dormer.

In his estimation, Pennsylvania has made significant strides in equitable education funding in a remarkably short period. He calls the recent Commonwealth Court ruling **"a game-changer"** because it acknowledged the historical underfunding of districts like Norristown and put judicial pressure on the legislature to act decisively. Without the ruling, Dormer said he believes Norristown's inadequate funding would have persisted for decades, as new funding was pushed out incrementally through the weighted fair funding formula. Instead, last year in the 2024-25 state budget, Norristown received over \$5 million in adequacy funding and more than \$1 million in tax equity funding. The district also received over \$2 million in additional basic education funding, a nine percent increase.

Thanks to sustained funding, Norristown has not had to lay off teachers or reduce staff since 2019. Instead, investments have expanded frontline support for students, including the hiring of 59 additional staff members. Notably, the district has gone from zero to 20 reading specialists in elementary and middle schools, added paraprofessionals and math coaches, and maintained smaller class sizes. The K-4 student-teacher ratio has improved from 27:1 to 21:1, ensuring more



personalized instruction. **"Everything [we've done with new funds], we know benefits kids,"** said Dormer, emphasizing the direct impact of these investments on student outcomes.

Early literacy initiatives have yielded promising results. Third-grade reading scores are rebounding to pre-pandemic levels, and proficiency rates are steadily increasing. The district has implemented Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), allowing for data-driven interventions. With the LinkIt! data dashboard, which was previously unaffordable, Norristown is now more data-informed in its instructional strategies. **"We're well on our way to rebounding from Covid setbacks,"** Dormer said. Additionally, STAR 360 data shows that third-grade reading proficiency in 2024-25 has improved by seven percentage points over the past year.

Norristown's new state funding has bolstered its ability to offer more competitive salaries, allowing the district to retain quality educators. Historically, due to underfunding, the district has struggled to compete with neighboring districts: **"If we can't pay people, they're going to say 'thank you' and go somewhere else,"** Dormer said. Recently, the district has been able to offer pay increases of around five percent, ensuring that educators committed to the district can continue to serve students without financial insecurity.

While new state funds have yielded dramatic gains, Norristown still faces financial pressures. One major cost driver is increasing special education and early intervention costs. The district is enrolling 75 high-needs kindergarteners per year, and the number of students requiring early intervention is growing by about 50 students annually, Dormer said. Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding and state special education investments have failed to keep pace with rising actual special education costs, forcing the district to cover the rest locally to meet the requirements of IDEA.

Norristown's aging infrastructure presents significant challenges, too. Many buildings are between 65 and 100 years old, with urgent repair needs that impact student learning environments. While new adequacy funds have been earmarked for instructional purposes, Dormer said facility conditions play a crucial role in educational success: **"Students can't achieve their full potential in inadequate learning spaces."** For example, Blockson Middle School, which turns 100 years old in 2025, is not Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant, making specialized programming impossible without financially crippling renovations. A new building would cost \$25 million, far more practical than attempting to renovate the outdated structure, the superintendent said.

READING EAGLE

OPINION

It is not about politics. It is about every child in every Pennsylvania school district

Head of Norristown schools argues for stronger funding of underserved districts.

BY CHRISTOPHER DORMER

To sustain progress, districts need long-term funding assurances. Without a clear funding timeline for closing Norristown's remaining \$41 million adequacy gap, strategic planning is difficult. Any successful business would suffer if they had to make decisions without predictable information about future revenue, as Pennsylvania school districts do. **"If I know it's \$9 million next year, I can plan. But right now, we don't know if there will be money year to year,"** said Dormer. **"We can't make long-term plans without knowing what's coming."** He prefers the seven-year timeline proposed by the Basic Education Funding Commission in 2024 for closing the state adequacy gap: **"These are kids that have been robbed their entire academic careers by underfunded schools. A commitment [from the General Assembly to close the state adequacy gap] would be game-changing, life-changing for kids. If I could get a timeline, get out of our way and you will see the results."**

As legislators weigh whether to follow through on their constitutional obligations, Dormer reminds them that failure to invest in education can be costly as well, referencing research that students not reading proficiently by third grade face a higher likelihood of imprisonment: **"What if we took the money spent on prisons and invested in early literacy instead? More support at an early age means fewer support services needed later in life."**

The School District of Philadelphia



Superintendent: Dr. Tony B. Watlington, Sr.

FAST FACTS

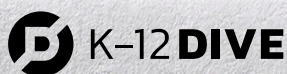
THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA in southeastern PA

District Locale: Urban	Schools: 220
Students: 117,985	Qualify for special education: 19%
Multilingual learners: 20%	Economically disadvantaged: 72%

Located in southeastern Pennsylvania, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is Pennsylvania's largest school district, located in the poorest big city in America. The urban district operates over 200 schools serving nearly 118,000 students. Eighty-five percent of students are people of color, 72 percent are economically disadvantaged, 19 percent qualify for special education, and 20 percent are multilingual learners.¹⁸

Superintendent Tony Watlington, recently named 2025 Superintendent of the Year by the District Administration Leadership Institute,¹⁹ consistently emphasizes how district leaders have been **"trusted stewards of taxpayer dollars,"** putting increased public education funding to good use. The \$136 million in adequacy funding SDP received in the 2024-25 state budget, part of an overall increase of \$232 million in state funding,²⁰ has allowed the district to maintain staffing and expand programming, leading to increased teacher retention and improved student outcomes.

Relying on research showing that a stable and highly qualified teacher workforce is linked to improved student outcomes, SDP has prioritized staffing in recent budgets. While districts were encouraged to use federal Covid funds on one-time, non-recurring costs, historically underfunded school districts like the School District of Philadelphia had no choice but to dedicate any available resources to ensure adequate staffing to meet heightened student needs during the pandemic, Dr. Watlington said. Adequacy funding has been a lifeline, allowing the district to retain 350 critically needed positions. Unlike in many districts across the country, SDP has not had to make staffing cuts for the 2024-25 school year, even with federal ESSER dollars drying up. Given that Philadelphia has historically had more teacher vacancies than any other Pennsylvania district, the ability to maintain recently added staff and avoid layoffs has been a key contributor to student achievement gains.



K-12 DIVE

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

How Philadelphia is accelerating learning recovery with an ambitious 5-year plan

Propelled by impressive academic recovery metrics, Superintendent Tony Watlington has curriculum rollouts, facilities improvements, and more on the agenda.

Another key recent investment has been in improved instructional resources and teacher training. After using ESSER funds to purchase new evidence-based reading and math curricula, SDP is now investing in targeted professional development for teachers to improve student achievement and help develop and retain staff. Dr. Watlington believes teachers deserve continuing education and professional development just like any other professional: **"No one questions if doctors and lawyers need to increase their credentials and certifications, and it should be the same with teachers."** With increased funding, SDP is also able to invest in **"recruiting teachers from diverse walks of life"** and retaining them with high-quality and differentiated professional development, he added.

Dr. Watlington recognizes that policymakers and taxpayers have had concerns about "wasting taxpayer dollars on bureaucratic systems," particularly in the wake of Covid-related school closures and virtual learning. While they are right to carefully consider the economic return on extremely limited taxpayer dollars, the return on recent investments is clear in student outcomes in SDP; research from Harvard recently found that Philadelphia was first in the country among large urban districts in math in post-pandemic academic recovery and second only to Chicago in reading.²¹

Due to strategic management and stewardship of increased adequacy funding, the School District of Philadelphia has a solvent budget and is seeing students benefit from these investments. However, next year, the district faces a fiscal cliff due to the loss of ESSER funds. Coupled with rising mandated costs for charter school reimbursements, special education, and staffing, SDP's long-term financial outlook is still bleak without the guarantee of the state closing its share of the district's remaining \$1.11 billion adequacy gap. Next year, the district will operate in deficit, dipping into its fund balance to prevent layoffs and budget cuts. But relying on reserves is not a sustainable long-term solution: **"If we did not use the fund balance, quite simply we would have to make people and program cuts,"** said Dr. Watlington.²²



Governor Shapiro's proposed budget for 2025-26 would bring an additional \$200 million to Philadelphia through funding increases and cost savings.²³ **"This proposed investment from the state would allow the district to continue accelerating academic achievement as the district works to become the fastest-improving, large urban school district in the nation,"** Dr. Watlington said.²⁴

If the legislature passes the governor's proposal, a top priority for him is the social-emotional well-being of students in SDP. Student survey and anecdotal data indicate that children in Philadelphia are not well, with 48 percent of students reporting feeling sad or depressed most days. With additional adequacy funding in the upcoming state budget, SDP would continue to invest in social-emotional learning resources, such as a **"structured curriculum to navigate the challenges of growing up, communicating, having 24/7 access to social media, online bullying and harassment, and the rapidly changing world around us that they struggle to understand,"** he said. SDP would also partner with providers to help students **"mitigate the anxieties of life, positively interact with each other and adults, and learn the soft and interpersonal skills that are required by employers."** Dr. Watlington expects these prospective investments in students' social and emotional well-being would lead to further improved attendance and graduation rates, because he said helping students learn social-emotional skills allows them to show up more productively at school.

Even if the governor's proposal is passed in full this year, the state will have filled less than a quarter of SDP's total \$1.25 billion adequacy gap, and Dr. Watlington notes that the district could do much more if it knew it could count on sustainable, predictable state funding increases and

cyber charter savings. One area in which the district needs additional support is to address its decades-long facilities crisis. **"The average school district building is 73 years old, with some over 120 years old,"** said Dr. Watlington, meaning that almost all of the schools contain asbestos, outdated plumbing, and lead paint. Schools in the district have experienced school closures due to asbestos remediation, burst pipes, caved-in ceilings, and lack of air conditioning. Some schools, particularly in northeast Philadelphia, are also very overcrowded, with enrollment exceeding school building capacity.

These subpar facilities have a direct impact on student learning and academic growth: closed schools mean lost learning time, whereas research has found that safe, well-maintained buildings lead to higher student attendance.²⁵ SDP's five-year plan, Accelerate Philly, includes an eight-phase planning process for facilities improvements that includes collecting stakeholder feedback, drafting improvement plans, and preparing alternative locations to relocate students and staff when necessary. But without additional state or local funding dedicated to facilities, students will not have one of the essential elements of an adequate education: safe, temperate facilities.

Dr. Watlington's message to the state is clear: In order to deliver on his big goals to Accelerate Philly and continue making academic progress the district's **"North Star,"** the legislature must accelerate its commitment to closing the adequacy gap and making up for decades of underfunding. **"At all costs, we must do all we can to protect the classroom,"** he said. **"It takes resources, people, and a strategy—a combination of those things—to do it."**²⁶





CONCLUSION

These case studies demonstrate how the first installment of state adequacy dollars is being put to good use and leading to immediate benefits in districts across Pennsylvania. As these seven examples show, district leaders are using these investments to purchase new evidence-based curriculum, hire or maintain critical new educator and support positions, establish new programming and wraparound student services, and create innovative new partnerships. Importantly, new state investments are also mitigating the impact of the sunset of federal Covid funds, helping districts avoid the kinds of layoffs and program cuts seen elsewhere across the country. And these are the stories from just a handful of districts receiving adequacy funds; there are hundreds of other districts across Pennsylvania making intentional investments based on their unique community needs.

While the impact of these investments cannot be fully measured less than a year later, there is already early evidence of tangible impact on student outcomes: improved attendance rates, fewer disciplinary incidents, reduced teacher turnover and vacancies, increases on school-based assessments, and more. And these are just the gains seen in the early months of 2025 after only 11 percent of the state's total \$4.5 billion adequacy gap has been closed; it is important to remember that the districts with state adequacy gaps are still collectively underfunded by \$4 billion.

The superintendents we interviewed were clear-eyed about the continued financial challenges they face if the General Assembly does not make good on its constitutional obligation to fully close its share of the adequacy gap: property tax increases, cuts to programming and personnel, or exhaustion of local reserves. On the other hand, they have concrete visions and plans for how much more they could do if they could count on continued adequacy increases within a reasonable timeframe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The stories of these districts make clear that while recent state investments have been critical, there is still much more to be done to reach a constitutional school funding system. Based on these case studies, we make the following recommendations to the General Assembly:

- **Continue to invest at least \$500 million per year in adequacy funding until the remaining \$4 billion state adequacy gap is closed.** The legislature's work to rectify Pennsylvania's unconstitutional school funding system did not end last year—it only began. The state has only closed 11 percent of its overall share of the statewide adequacy gap, and districts will not be able to sustain their gains and recover from decades of underfunding in a single year. It is critical that these investments are sustained, if not accelerated, to fully address the Commonwealth Court ruling.
- **Commit to a clear timeline for closing the adequacy gap.** Without a timeline, districts are left guessing about how much state revenue to count on and unable to make projections or plans for the future. With an appropriate timeline, districts can plan proactively for long-term, high-impact investments.
- **Follow through on other state funding increases and cost saving measures to benefit all school districts.** While the primary focus of this report has been adequacy funding, district leaders made clear that they are counting on other proposed investments from the state, as well. In particular, superintendents emphasized the financial pressures caused by rising cyber charter costs and the necessity of the cost savings that would come from Governor Shapiro's proposed statewide tuition rate of \$8,000. They also highlighted the need for increases to basic and special education, as well as the necessity for dedicated facilities funding. If basic and special education funding increases do not keep pace with inflation and facilities maintenance needs are not addressed, districts will be forced to use adequacy funds to tread water rather than to bring their educational programs up to adequate levels.

Pennsylvania students are already benefitting in concrete ways from the state's first installment of adequacy funding and other recent investments in public education. With continued, sustained investment, lawmakers can ensure that every school is adequately resourced and ensure a bright future for every student across the commonwealth.



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AUTHORS

Kaitlin Alsopp, Meghan Amayo, Eric Hitchner, Cory Hulsizer, Tarzan MacMood,
Kaitlin McCann, Brynn Raub, Ciminy St. Clair, Nelson Suarez, Nicole Wyglendowski

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