

Review of Public School Budget – Battle and Results
July 2019
Fran Pierce, AAUW Pennsylvania Education Committee

AAUW-PA members were instrumental in helping to achieve a more equitable budget for education in Pennsylvania schools. The second of the AAUW-PA Public Policy Priorities for 2018-20 states that in order to support a quality system of public education we advocate, among other things, “...**support for a fair and adequately funded system of public education.**” To achieve that goal, AAUW-PA has collaborated with organizations whose goals are in line with ours in order to intensify our efforts, not duplicate work being done by others, and share the burden that is needed to accomplish our mutual ends.

As the Pennsylvania budget battle heated up in the fall of 2018, members of our Education Committee worked with several other organizations, especially *Education Voters PA* and *PA Schools Work* which is a coalition of over 30 pro-public education organizations. We helped to mobilize our members and supporters for the immense lobbying effort that was needed to pass a state budget that would grant increases in public education on a scale not seen in a decade. We also provided speakers to help inform our members and circulated information through our branch newsletters about the reasons for the increased funding need.

Working with these two organizations and many others, we accomplished more than any of us could have hoped to accomplish alone and by the end of June of this year, the state legislature had passed and Governor Wolf had signed a budget that, according to *PA Schools Work*, “...moderately boosts public school funding...” That organization also stated that the most significant increases were the \$50 million increase in funding to support the needs of special education students and the \$10 million increase for career and technical education. They pointed out that despite the millions in increases, this budget, “at best...keeps many schools from falling further behind, but will likely necessitate...” further tax increases at the local level and does nothing to help districts achieve the necessary level of educational excellence that the state’s economy requires. See paschoolswork.org and click on “budget.”

Ed Voters PA labeled this budget as, “The Good, Bad, Ugly, and Unconscionable.” While thanking Governor Wolf multiple times for his firm stand against the worst of the proposals attempted by the Republicans in our state legislature, *Ed Voters* pointed out that the pattern of voting during this budget deliberation strongly suggests that a great deal of work needs to be done by all of us who are concerned about the underfunding of our Public Schools. Even with the additional \$160 million, *Ed Voters* explained that students in the most needy districts will still be left behind the wealthier districts in terms of their basic education needs, while their taxpayers will probably see even higher increases.

For example, leaders in the Republican Party cut the governor’s initial *increase* in the education budget from \$200 million to \$160 million and then provided an **additional** \$30 million for the private/religious school tuition giveaway that is called the Educational Tax Credit program. This program allows for tax credits to corporations that donate to certain, approved organizations to

provide scholarships to their students. Although these students are supposed to be “needy,” the income level for a family with one student to be eligible for one of these scholarships is \$158,858 in 2019-20. The program, known by the acronym EITC, was designed, according to research by *Ed Voters*, to provide tuition-assistance to families who are well-off, and a quick perusal of the list of “eligible” school entities on the website www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs reveals that the overwhelming majority of those benefitting are students at Catholic or other religious schools. Additionally, this budget item has already increased nearly SIX-FOLD from \$35.7 million in 2010 to \$210 million this coming school year.

See educationvoterspa.org and the blog “Edvopa” for specifics on the PA State Budget.

Most appalling during the budget talks were the attempts of a group of anti-public school lawmakers who were nearly successful in including language that would have added harmful charter school language to the school code. Veiled in language that called their efforts, “charter school reform,” the proposals would have allowed more charter schools to be approved, would have reduced the ability of local districts to hold charters accountable for student performance, and would do nothing to allow local districts to recall a school’s charter due to poor performance. These proposals were thankfully defeated, due to intense work of AAUW members in coordination with the members of many statewide, pro-public education organizations. To see the long list of organizations who are collaborating in this continuing struggle, go to <http://paschoolswork.org/partners/>