

Akron School District Superintendent in a State of Akron Public School address calls for state legislators to fund one school system—the public one.

The Akron Superintendent, in the spirit of the Akron School Law of 1847, called on the legislature to fund the one public system. (The Akron Law created the city's public schools and the K-12 grade system under the leadership of one city-wide board of education. This provided a model now used throughout the nation.)

The tide is turning against the use of tax money to fund private school ventures.

Early literacy, improved school funding among Akron school's superintendent's priorities

Mary Outley's State of the Akron Public Schools address calls for state legislators to fund one school system — the public one.

by **Arielle Kass**

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Mary Outley wants to see Akron students return to **Akron Public Schools**. And she wants community members to know that when they don't, it costs the district money.

Outley, the superintendent of APS, made the case Tuesday that \$11 million in planned cuts is due, in part, to public tax dollars going to **fund other schools**, including private schools, with **vouchers**.

She said, too, that the district spends \$3 million annually to transport Akron residents to non-APS schools, as is required by law.

The efforts hinder her ability to educate students, she said. And in a State of the Akron Public Schools speech before more than 400 people at Quaker Station, she asked those in attendance to help stop it.

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"I ask that we fund one school system, our public school system," Outley said in her speech, sponsored by the **Akron Press Club**.

Outley asked attendees to call their legislators and ask them to "live up to their responsibility to fairly and appropriately fund our schools."

She noted that it's been nearly 30 years since the state Supreme Court called Ohio's funding system unconstitutional. A separate push to eliminate property taxes in the state could further hurt school funding.

"The impact of this is hard to fathom, other than to say it's just unconscionable," she said.

Even now, the amount of federal funds that are going to public schools is flat as the cost to educate students, and maintain schools, continues to rise. Outley called the rising costs, and the falling revenues caused by shrinking enrollment, a "perfect financial storm."

Improving early literacy in Akron a priority

The financial challenges the district is facing continue in spite of a number of academic improvements, Outley said. Those include success in college, career, workforce and military readiness and progress with academic growth, both of which the district is exceeding expectations in. Its 3.5 stars out of five on the **state report card** are the best among large urban school districts in Ohio, she said.

Still, there are issues APS needs to address. Chief among them is **early literacy**.

Fewer than half of APS' third graders are proficient in reading, she said, a national issue that "does not make it OK for it to be a problem in Akron."

Outley positioned improved literacy as an issue that is integral to not just student success, but to the city's.

"Early literacy is not simply one challenge," she said. "It is the challenge that threatens to undermine all our future successes."

As the region is [bringing in \\$100 million](#) in investment in polymers, and [seeking more](#) federal funds, having Akron students who can't read threatens the city's competitiveness, Outley said.

"This isn't just an education problem," she said. "This is an economic development crisis."

She said improving literacy is the bridge that supports Akron's future.

Efforts to improve literacy have begun. Those include tutoring students who are most at risk of falling behind three times a week, integrating literacy into other classes, like math, and switching instruction to a science of reading program.

But, Outley said, the district can't do the work on its own. She implored family members to read to children daily, and to send their children to school each day. She also asked business leaders to volunteer in schools and fund efforts to tackle the achievement gap.

"We stand at a crossroads," she said. "Not just for our schools, but for our entire community."

'She didn't skirt the challenges'

Larry Johnson and Michelle Marquess-Kearns, who are executive directors of school leadership for APS' middle and high schools, respectively, said they appreciated that Outley was transparent about both the highs and lows APS is facing.

"She didn't skirt the challenges," Marquess-Kearns said. "I appreciate that she talked about the challenges."

Outley's speech came after just 10 months [on the job](#) — [she replaced](#) the previous superintendent, [Michael Robinson](#), in a [controversial](#), late-night vote last April. But Johnson said Outley immediately helped to lower the temperature during what had been a tense period for the district.

"What she did today was illustrate and tell the story for why APS should be your destination," he said. "If you're really looking for a viable option, APS is clearly the choice. She did more than tell the story."

Pat Shipe, the president of the [Akron Education Association](#), said she thought Outley's efforts to explain the funding issues the school system faces were impactful.

"Taxpayer funding should not be going to for-profit schools," she said.

Outley, after the speech, said she hoped some of the 209 Akron residents who are attending Cuyahoga Falls schools would return to APS when that district ends open enrollment next year. All told, there are 9,500 students who live in Akron but go to school outside APS; each costs the school district nearly \$10,000, she said.

Outley also said she hopes the stability she's created in nearly a year on the job will attract some of those students back.

"Who would want to send their kids to a district [that's in turmoil](#)? That's just the truth," Outley said. "We know some have come back. ... There's still a lot of work to do."

CC4273 3.10.26 Tuesday

And the superintendent, who described herself as the narrator of the students' story, said she continues to see improvements in graduation rates and other markers that indicate progress is being made.

After her speech, Outley said she hoped attendees understood that the district is a good financial steward that is serious about educating its students but could use more community help.

"I don't want it to come across that it's all roses. It's not," she said. "I want to listen to the concerns that are still out there and address them."