

A July 5, Columbus Dispatch guest column by the Columbus School District Board President and Treasurer responds to a recent comment by the chair of the Senate Education Committee.

The Senate Education Committee chair recently made a public statement that rural schools have less funding because urban districts spend too much. Board President Antoinette Miranda and Treasurer Ryan Cook challenge the Senator's pronouncement with facts and rightly state that the school funding problem is the fault of the state's refusal to follow a 1997 Ohio Supreme Court order to fix the school funding system.

A favorite ploy of the legislature is to divide the public school community by attempting to pit various sectors of the public education community against one another: rural against urban, rural and urban against suburban, special education against general education, and career tech education against general education.

Since 1976 I have watched the above scenario play out dozens of times. This ploy has gotten state officials off the hook repeatedly. Possibly the public education community will, in unison, start to challenge state officials and force the state to comply with the 1997 DeRolph Court decision. State officials work for the citizens; all political power is inherent in the people. Article I, section 2.

Don't blame urban schools for state decisions

Your Turn Ryan Cook and Antoinette Miranda Guest columnists

When Ohio Senate Education Committee Chair Andy Brenner recently suggested that rural schools have less funding because "urban school systems [are] spending too much money inefficiently," he wasn't just wrong — he was distracting Ohioans from the real problem.

The numbers tell a very different story.

For every student educated in Columbus City Schools, the state of Ohio contributes just \$4,442. Meanwhile, the residents of Columbus contribute \$14,117 per student through local property taxes. Local taxpayers — not the state — carry the overwhelming burden of educating our children.

This isn't evidence of urban districts wasting money. It's evidence of decades of legislative disinvestment.

Ohio has known its school funding system is unconstitutional since the Ohio Supreme Court's landmark De-Rolph decision in 1997. Yet nearly three decades later, the state's commitment to public education has continued to erode. The state's share of public-school funding has fallen from approximately 47% following DeRolph to a projected 32% in 2027.

As state support has declined, local taxpayers have been forced to make up the difference.

The consequences are clear. Since 2005, state tax reductions have created an estimated \$18.6 billion revenue gap, limiting the resources available to invest in public education and other essential services. School districts across Ohio are increasingly left with only two choices: reduce educational opportunities for students or ask local communities to approve additional property tax levies.

That isn't sustainable. And it certainly isn't fair.

Urban districts face many challenges

Urban districts like Columbus educate large concentrations of students living in poverty, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, homeless students, children dealing with trauma, housing instability, food insecurity and mental health crises. These are not abstract categories on a spreadsheet. They are real children whose ability to learn depends on schools providing supports far beyond basic classroom instruction.

Rather than acknowledging this reality, some policymakers choose to blame the very districts working every day to educate Ohio's largest student populations.

That requires investment. Calling these investments "inefficient spending" ignores the reality of what public schools are being asked to do. The truth is that urban districts are often punished for serving the students with the greatest needs.

Funding formulas rarely keep pace with concentrated poverty, aging infrastructure, rising transportation costs, special education mandates and staffing shortages. Meanwhile, political rhetoric paints urban schools as bloated or wasteful whenever they advocate for the resources necessary to educate all children.

And let's be honest about what Brenner's argument implies: that struggling rural districts would somehow thrive if urban districts simply spent less money.

All schools need more support

Pitting rural communities against urban communities does nothing to solve Ohio's school funding crisis. Rural schools and urban schools share the same challenge: a state funding system that has steadily shifted responsibility away from the state and onto local taxpayers.

This should concern every Ohioan, regardless of where they live.

The conversation should not be about blaming one district or another. It should be about whether Ohio is meeting its constitutional obligation to provide a thorough and efficient system of public education. This requires the state to provide public educational access and ensure school districts are adequately funded and resourced. The evidence suggests we still have work to do.

We encourage our residents to watch the Columbus City Schools Board of Education meeting from May 19, where we discussed the unique challenges urban school districts face because of continued legislative disinvestment. The facts speak for themselves.

Ohio's educators, students and taxpayers deserve an honest conversation. The conversation we need is why the state continues forcing school districts to do more with less while blaming educators and communities for the impossible choices that follow.

Urban districts are not the problem. Legislative disinvestment is.

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