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Josh Shapiro's Victory in Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Race Could Bolster School Funding

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To pay the staff, Megan Marie Van Fossan's school district takes out loans.

Among her 1,170 students, more than four in five qualify for free or reduced school lunches. While nearby districts have social workers and dedicated directors for curriculum and school safety, hers struggles just to pay utility bills, she said.

"I sit in meetings and literally think: 'Our security last Friday worked — it caught both weapons,'" said Ms. Van Fossan, superintendent of the Sto-Rox School District in McKees Rocks and Stowe. "My kids deserve a high-quality education. The ZIP code where they were born should not determine that."

Gov.-elect Josh Shapiro should know her reality as he develops proposals for Pennsylvania schools, she said last week, urging better state support for districts in cash-strapped communities. After his gubernatorial bid promoted education spending, advocates in the field are waiting to see how Mr. Shapiro's campaign — and his record as state attorney general — translates into action.

Several said he should prioritize narrowing the gap between districts with rich property-tax rolls and those with little ability to raise local revenue. While outgoing Gov. Tom Wolf's administration reported growing education allocations by more than \$3.7 billion since 2015, Pennsylvania still ranks among the least generous states for its contribution to local K-12 budgets.

That leaves districts to lean on federal and local sources — in particular property taxes — for 60% to 65% of their spending, said Andrew Christ, senior director of education policy at the Pennsylvania State School Boards Association.

The Shapiro campaign did not immediately comment after the Montgomery County Democrat topped GOP nominee Doug Mastriano in Tuesday's gubernatorial election. But in his victory speech, Mr. Shapiro mentioned his commitment to children and schools.

"Real freedom won tonight. Real freedom — the kind of real freedom that sees possibility in all God's children, which forces us to then step up for those kids and invest in their public school to give them a shot. Real freedom won — the kind of real freedom that allows us to invest in a safer community so all God's children make it to their 18th birthday."

Mr. Mastriano argued for eliminating property taxes and restructuring the state's approach to education funding, with public money "to follow students instead of systems."

"Candidate Shapiro made statements about making sure K-12 is fully funded," Mr. Christ said. "'Fully funded' can mean very different things depending on who you talk to. We're definitely going to try to work with the Shapiro administration to make sure there's continued investments in K-12 education, continuing the work done by Gov. Wolf."

As attorney general, Mr. Shapiro filed a brief in May supporting a landmark lawsuit over school funding. Filed by a handful of Pennsylvania districts and two law centers, the suit alleges the state has failed state constitutional requirements because it relies too much on local tax dollars, thereby discriminating against poorer districts.

"The commonwealth's most fundamental need is an intelligent and informed citizenry, which will support our democratic institutions, grow our economy and strengthen the foundations of our shared civic life," the Shapiro brief reads. He argued that lawmakers "must both ensure that the system has adequate resources and that it is actually providing the level of education required by the Constitution."

A decision from the Commonwealth Court is pending. Among his gubernatorial campaign statements, Mr. Shapiro committed to putting at least one counselor in every school building statewide.

That's a start, although "I'd like to see commitment based on what schools need," said Ericka S. Weathers, an assistant professor of education policy at the University of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Shapiro differs from many Democrats in his support for school choice, including a program that would let families in poorly performing school districts educate their kids elsewhere with public money, Ms. Weathers said. Mr. Shapiro has voiced support for school choice in addition to well-funded traditional public schools.

"I think, based on his track record, he will put children first and the needs of students and schools first," Ms. Weathers said. "But I think there may be some gray [area] on his stand on school choice, how to fully fund schools and how to do both at the same time."

On overall funding, the Shapiro administration will probably seek increases in state dollars as the Wolf administration did, said Ronald Cowell, executive director at the Harrisburg-based Education Policy and Leadership Center nonprofit. The state has started closing the gap between poorer and wealthier school districts, he said.

But there's general consensus that "it's not enough progress and it's not happening fast enough," Mr. Cowell said. Maintaining and building upon the momentum will be a challenge for the new administration, he said.

'How much is enough?'

Repeated studies link more education spending to better test scores and graduation rates, among other benefits, according to the news nonprofit Chalkbeat. Mr. Wolf has made state education

support more equitable through a “fair funding formula” and through the Level Up program, which improves allocations for Pennsylvania’s 100 most underfunded districts, spokeswoman Elizabeth Rementer said in a statement.

Both endeavors could be reinforced and broadened with stronger political support in Harrisburg, supporters said. Mr. Wolf’s funding requests often clashed with the Republican-controlled General Assembly, where leaders have defended the state’s school funding as adequate and constitutional.

“If Josh Shapiro’s goal is to fully fund, it would be hard to do so if the Legislature is fully controlled by the GOP,” Ms. Weathers said. By late last week, two close races left majority control of the state House in limbo.

Democratic control could deliver “a stronger hand at the negotiating table to increase the state share of public education funding” and ease pressure on property taxes, said state Rep. Mark Longietti of Mercer County. He is Democratic chair of the House Education Committee.

At the Commonwealth Foundation, based in Harrisburg, Nate Benefield called it a mistake to cast the state as a cheapskate on education. An analysis by the conservative foundation found Pennsylvania’s state funding for public schools, on a per-student basis, exceeds the national average.

And a Cato Institute study in 2014 found “essentially no link” between state education funding and student performance at the end of high school, the foundation noted.

“Families want not just more money but better outcomes, opportunity,” said Mr. Benefield, a senior vice president at the foundation. “Providing more choice and opportunity empowers parents with money that follows the child.”

While teacher unions want more money for education, Pennsylvanians broadly are interested in better schools across the board, he said. Mr. Shapiro’s constant attention on more spending is a red flag, he said.

“I would raise questions and challenge him on how much is needed, how much is enough,” Mr. Benefield said.