

**May Mayor's Article**  
**Mayor Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins**  
**"The Scratch Line"**

When I was a child growing up in Compton, just outside Los Angeles, we set up foot races by scratching a starting line on the street. I learned that you can't win the race when you don't have a good place to start. If you wanted a chance at winning, you had to be poised to take off quickly from that "scratch line."

That lesson has stuck with me many years later – many miles away from where I started.

Following the example of my mother, a teacher in the Compton schools, I pursued my education but took a slightly different path as an ordained American Baptist clergyman. After serving as a pastor in California, I migrated to the east coast more than 30 years ago and made Collegeville my home.

It is different in many respects from Compton, but each is a great place to live. I want my children and grandchildren to have the same longing and hunger for Collegeville that I have always had for Compton.

Now, I am proud to serve as mayor of my adopted home.

One of the things my time in Collegeville and my work in community, public, and congregational service have continually brought to light for me are the disparities in education and opportunity between wealthy and poor communities and between Black and white ones. That is a particular problem in Pennsylvania, which has some of the widest gaps in spending across school districts of any state in the country. That is because Pennsylvania is near the bottom when it comes to state share for funding for public education. Unlike many other states, most funding for public schools here is generated at the local level, mainly through property taxes.

I am blessed to live within the Perkiomen Valley School District, or as we call it, "PV." The poverty rate is lower than in most school districts around the state, and the property values higher. That means that the school district has more local wealth to draw from to pay for what our students need. PV is near the top quarter of Pennsylvania school districts in spending per student. Even with that, if the state were to fully fund PV according to the state's own funding benchmark, the school district would be receiving \$5 million more from the state per year than it does now.

The situation is much more dire in many other Pennsylvania school districts. Just one county over, the Reading School District, faced with high poverty and low property values, struggles to come up with the resources to support their students, nearly all of whom are children of color.

Reading School District spends about \$4,800 less per student than Perkiomen Valley. That means that in a classroom of 25 students, Reading must make do with \$120,000 less. Think about what could be done for the students in a Reading classroom with that additional money: up-to-date books and technology; more STEM and math opportunities; or perhaps more hands-on instruction from teachers that would come with smaller class sizes. Greater resources could mean greater success in recruiting and retaining teachers of color, so students could identify with more teachers and staff in their school buildings and more closely connect with role models in the front of their classrooms.

My experience as a minister, parent, grandparent, and now mayor of Collegeville, taught me that too many students start “behind the scratch line” – that starting line we marked off as children.

Picture a track race in which some runners line up 100 yards away from the finish line, while others are permitted to start just 80 yards away. That is what it feels like for many students in school districts like Reading. They must make up so much more ground to get to the graduation finish line. It’s no wonder that about 96% of Perkiomen Valley’s students graduate, compared to 72% of Reading’s. Their students have no less potential and are no less deserving than ours. They were just unlucky to have been born in a different, less financially well-off zip code.

This year, Pennsylvania has what may be an unprecedented opportunity to begin remedying the state’s unfair and inadequate school funding system. Thanks to robust state revenues, the state will be flush with billions of unspent dollars by the end of its fiscal year this summer.

It will have more than enough money to pay for a new investment of \$1.75 billion in public schools that was proposed by the governor for next year’s budget. That is being called a major down payment on the \$4.6 billion state funding shortfall that has built up over the years.

All that is needed is for the state legislature to embrace this proposal and make it a reality in a state budget bill.

Going back to that childhood lesson: You can’t win the race when you don’t have a good place to start. It’s well past time for Pennsylvania to make sure every child, no matter where they live, gets off to a good running start.