

Avon Grove School District Testimony

Senate Majority Policy Committee Public Hearing on
“The Basic Education Funding Formula and
Its Impact on Growing School Districts”

Avon Grove Intermediate School Audion
October 17, 2007

Welcome & Introductions:

Good afternoon, my name is Lynn Klingensmith. It's a pleasure to be here today representing Avon Grove School District, and I thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you some of the challenges we face as a growing school district.

I am now entering my 6th year of service on the Avon Grove School District Board of School Directors, and am currently serving for the second year as Vice President. Previously, I served two years as Secretary, and two years as President of the Board.

With me today are Dr. Augustus J. Massaro, Superintendent of Schools, and Mr. James A. Ascutto, our Business Manager.

Background:

Avon Grove School District is located in southern Chester County, close to the Maryland and Delaware state borders. We currently serve 5,445 students in four schools: Penn London Elementary School (K-2), Avon Grove Intermediate School (3-6), Fred S. Engle Middle School (7-8), and Avon Grove High School (9-12).

New London, Penn, Franklin, and London Britain townships in southern Chester County joined together in 1953 to form Avon Grove School District. In 1965, London Grove Township and Avondale and West Grove boroughs — the largest population centers in Avon Grove — joined the District. We currently serve a 67-square-mile area that includes the five townships and two boroughs.

Our community can trace its beginnings to colonial America. Three signers of the Declaration of Independence — Thomas McKean, George Read, and James Smith — attended New London Academy, founded in 1743.

Our current high school opened in 1957. There are currently 1,831 students at AGHS. Fred S. Engle Middle School opened in 1970. The middle school currently serves 871 students. Both secondary schools make use of portable learning cottages due to lack of space for housing existing programs and student classrooms.

Our newest buildings were constructed in response to accelerated growth in our area, which began in the 1980s and 1990s and still continues today. Penn London Elementary School, which opened in 1991, was originally built as a K-5 school.

Penn London Elementary was expanded, and a 14,000-square-foot kindergarten center opened in the fall of 2001. The building now houses 1,067 students in kindergarten through second grade.

Avon Grove Intermediate School, which opened in 2002, serves 1,676 students in grades 3 through 6. Prior to opening AGIS, the District closed the aging Kemblesville Elementary School, which opened in 1956, and Avon Grove Elementary School, which was built in 1928 as the original high school for the Avon Grove Consolidated School System.

Growth Driven by Reputation for Excellence:

Even as recent as 20 years ago, the area known as Avon Grove was a much more rural. Over the years, the bucolic setting, attractive home values, availability of land, strong sense of community, and other factors led to more and more residential development.

As Avon Grove School District's reputation for offering a high quality, pupil-centered education grew, more and more families were attracted to our area because of our schools. We also boast a strong level of parent involvement and volunteerism in our schools.

In 2002-2003 Avon Grove School District served 4,700 students. That number increased to 4,846 in 2003-2004. By 2004-2005, our enrollment grew by 159 more students to 5,005. In 2005-2006, enrollment grew by 201 students for a total student population of 5,206. In 2006-2007, we grew by 181 students for a total enrollment of 5,387. As of October 3, 2007, we are serving 5,445 students.

In a five-year period, our overall student population has grown by 745 students or 15.9 percent.

More than 20 percent of our population works in Delaware, and many of our residents commute as far away as Philadelphia, Maryland and New Jersey to work

The trends are clear. Residents like our community. They take pride in our schools. New developments continue to go up. And families continue to relocate here. Despite some slowing in the housing market, we expect this growth trend to continue.

To continue meeting expectations for student achievement, and to provide engaging and challenging instruction for all of our students, we continue to strengthen our curriculum and enhance instructional programs.

- Examples include the growth of our Advanced Placement program, increased AP course offerings, and increased student participation rates in AP exams over the last several years. Avon Grove High School currently offers 14 AP courses. Consistently over the last several years, about 80 percent of our students taking AP exams earn a passing score of 3 or more. This year, we have 34 AP Scholars.
- Based on 2007 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests and other data, all four Avon Grove schools and the District met Adequate Yearly Progress this year. Our schools met or exceeded requirements in all scored target areas.
- Using a formula based on three years of PSSA test scores from 2003-2004 through 2005-2006, the Pittsburgh Business Times ranked Avon Grove School District 88th out of 500 public school districts in Pennsylvania.

- And earlier this year, Expansion Management magazine named Avon Grove a “Gold Medal” district based on its 16th annual Education Quotient ratings of 2,819 school districts throughout the United States. Gold Medal Schools are ranked among the top 16 percent of school districts evaluated based on three indices. Expansion Management magazine is a business publication for company executives who are actively looking for a place to expand or relocate in the next one to three years.

While we are proud of these and many more accomplishments, as well as our reputation for outstanding schools, it is clear that the overall growth of our student population, increased numbers of English Language Learner students, and the size constraints of our school buildings do present challenges which must be overcome.

Effect of Growth on Infrastructure:

As I mentioned earlier, both our middle and high schools are currently at or near capacity. We use portable learning cottages at both locations to provide needed classroom space.

While we continue to take deliberate, thoughtful steps to expand our program offerings for students, lack of space in our existing school buildings does impact decisions. To an extent, we are constrained by the existing physical plant.

For example, we expanded our strings orchestra program to include seventh-graders last year, and eighth-graders this year. The program will expand to the high school next year; however,

because of increasing capacity at the high school, we'll need to be creative with scheduling and making effective use of limited space.

Avon Grove School District purchased a total of 152.41 acres in Penn Township with intentions to build a 1,700-seat middle school on the site. We are currently involved in the PlanCon process for constructing a new school. The current design concept allows for the possibility to expand the building in the future if additional capacity is needed, as projected, to accommodate a growing population at the high school.

The estimated construction cost of \$90 million equates to about \$52,941 per student (\$90 million divided by 1,700 students served). In theory, each additional student results in a capital cost of \$52,941 paid over twenty years at an estimated annual cost of \$3,944 per student.

The long-term effect of growth is that significant capital costs must be incurred in order to provide adequate space and a proper educational environment for our students.

There are few commercial and industrial properties in Avon Grove School District; therefore, most of the tax burden to pay for new school construction falls upon residential property owners.

A possible solution to mitigate this effect would be adding "impact fees," similar to those imposed by municipalities on new residential properties to offset or cover capital outlay costs.