Addressing the Challenges of Homelessness and Education in PA District 104

PUBPL 304 White Paper No. 4

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PENN STATE HARRISBURG
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1 The opinions and arguments put forth in this report are not endorsed or representative of the Pennsylvania State University. They are the product of student and faculty research. Any errors are our own.
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Executive Summary

District 104 of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives comprises a part of the City of Harrisburg and several boroughs, including Steelton and Highspire. This report has focused on one issue for each part of the district. The City of Harrisburg has maintained a consistent homeless population and has had to find ways to house those individuals regularly. The Boroughs of Steelton and Highspire lack the needed funding for the combined Steelton-Highspire School District to sufficiently serve its students. This report includes two chapters with six recommendations on how to house the homeless population of Harrisburg and improve the educational quality of the Steelton-Highspire School District through funding.

Housing for the Homeless

Obtaining stable housing provides homeless individuals with the ability to access supportive services routinely and lowers the chance that they will end up unhoused again. Of the 760 homeless individuals surveyed in the 2019 Point-in-time Count for the PA-501 Continuum of Care, 14% were chronically homeless, and 200 had mental health or substance abuse concerns, indicating a need for more permanent housing than shelters that would offer access to rehabilitative services. In the traditional for-profit subsidized housing model, individuals must meet a series of eligibility requirements and rely on landlord participation in the program to have a housing supply. We consider utilizing the city Harrisburg Housing Authority’s participation in HUD’s Moving To Work (MTW) Program to gradually transfer ownership of the subsidized housing provided under HCVs from the private market to the PHA, replicating the model King County Housing Authority (KCHA) created. The management of these properties would come from outside contractors. Through the MTW Program, KCHA still falls under the ACC of the Faircloth Amendment.

The next solution we consider is creating Community Land Trusts (CLTs), a form of non-profit-owned housing where ownership is held by the specific organization permanently and leased to low-income individuals. Community Land Trusts are regulated by a board of directors that is made up of leaseholders, people who live within the area, and local representatives from the community, removing the discrimination that could be present in profit-based subsidized housing models. Creating a CLT in the city of Harrisburg that solely houses homeless individuals, without enforcing eligibility requirements, would eliminate the economic and social barriers associated with commodified housing.

Finally, we consider expanding the existing Housing First Approach that is currently implemented in Harrisburg. Housing First is a type of housing that provides immediate housing to homeless individuals, giving them accommodations before focusing on finding employment or providing services for mental health and substance abuse. Several nonprofits within Harrisburg currently offer one model, Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), that is based on the Housing First Approach and offers longer-term housing for homeless individuals. However, PSH focuses specifically on chronically homeless individuals and does not account for people that may be newly homeless or in other situations. The other model of the Housing First Approach, Rapid Re-Housing, is a more flexible intervention method that has not been widely adopted in
Harrisburg. It is an immediate preliminary action that decreases the possibility of returning to homelessness.

**Recommendations**

Transferring subsidized housing to the Harrisburg Housing Authority and working with the state, city, and local nonprofits to manage the properties and fund the transfer would eliminate the barriers to entry that come with profit-based housing models and voluntary landlord participation. The city and non-profits could work to implement Rapid Re-Housing in conjunction with PSH, providing more permanent housing to homeless individuals or families that are not within the chronically homeless subset. We also recommend Community Land Trusts as a sustainable way to obtain affordable housing to the homeless. Community Land Trusts allow the city to keep the costs low while still providing effective housing and services.

**Funding Educational Reforms**

Pennsylvania’s education system is funded by property taxes, so areas with lower costs of living generate less revenue than affluent areas. This results in pockets of wealthy suburban districts of disparately low-income urban and rural areas. The Steelton-Highspire School District is one underfunded district that ranks low in educational attainment. We consider replicating the Abbot districts created in New Jersey. Abbott districts are low-income, underperforming school districts in New Jersey that receive extra funding from the School Development Authority. Funding to each school district is calculated through the School Funding Reform Act, allocating funds based on the cost of adequately educating each student, demographics, and other factors.

Another solution that we consider is utilizing existing educational funding programs in Pennsylvania. In PA, the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTCP) and Educational Improvement Tax Program (EITC) allocate tax credits to businesses that provide funding for scholarships to eligible students in low-performing districts. The OSTCP allows students in households with incomes less than $105,813 to receive $8,500-$15,000 in scholarships for other public or private schools.

Finally, we consider consolidating the school districts in Pennsylvania. PA has over 500 school districts that range from 200 to 140,000 students, making it difficult to distribute federal funding equitably. Students would receive increased educational opportunities due to decreased costs because of consolidation.

After conducting a thorough analysis of the findings for Abbott Districts, School District Consolidation, and the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTCP) we have found many positives and negatives to all three. Abbott Districts provide extra funding to low-income districts based on the cost for each student. The positives for Abbott Districts are plentiful in that it doesn’t require a tax overhaul and doesn’t face political backlash for combining once independent districts and school boards. Abbott Districts do have one downside, however. Traditionally, Abbott funding is for construction and renovation projects, not for staff and educational materials. School district consolidation has many positives such as a larger tax base for funding, more educational opportunities, and a diverse student body. However, school district consolidation faces one major hurdle: politics. Once independent school districts and boards will
have a very difficult time consolidating. Finally, the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTCP) is very beneficial because it not only provides funding to students but also allows them to go to the school of their choice for their educational needs. The downside to this option is that it takes funding and opportunities from public schools and students who do not make the scholarship cut.

**Recommendations**

We have found clear evidence that implementing the Abbott Plan would help fix the education issue. The Abbott Plan will help identify underperforming and low-income schools and assist these districts with their shortfalls. It would also make sure that schools have the funding to repair schools so that students can learn in better environments. As previously stated, this policy would apply to school districts that are underfunded and that need the help that the policy will provide. To implement this policy, a new department will have to be created. This new department will be titled the School Development Authority (SDA) and their only purpose will be to implement the Abbott Plan. Considering a new governmental department must be created, the Abbott Plan will take some time to implement. Pennsylvania needs to evaluate how New Jersey implemented the plan and correct it, so it fits with PA’s legislation. Once more funding comes in for the budget of the Abbott Plan, it should be implemented to fit Pennsylvania’s districts.

Another recommendation is to expand opportunities for school choice. Right now, school choice opportunities in PA include the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTCP) and the Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program (EITC). The program already exists, so the same department will be handling its implementation. The policy should apply for students who go to schools in underfunded districts and companies that are willing to help fund the program. The budget for education should be evaluated before the program expands. If there is enough funding, expansion should be implemented.
**Introduction**

Pennsylvania’s District 104 changed substantially during the redistricting that followed the 2020 U.S. Census. Previously, the City of Harrisburg was represented by a single district (103), that also included the boroughs of Steelton and Highspire. District 104 stretched from more rural areas north of Harrisburg out into Lebanon County and did not include the city of Harrisburg, Steelton, or Highspire. Now, parts of Harrisburg are represented by Districts 103, 104, and 105, and the Route 230 corridor including Steelton, Highspire, and Penn State Harrisburg are included in District 104 (see Figure 1). This has changed how Harrisburg and its surrounding communities are represented in the General Assembly. Instead of a single representative (Patty Kim since 2013), there are now three. Since January 2023, Dave Madsen has represented the 104th district. Representative Madsen is a former member of the Harrisburg City Council. Thus, examining policy problems in District 104 offered Penn State Harrisburg students in PUBPL 304W Public Policy Analysis the opportunity to engage with issues that affect the City of Harrisburg (homelessness) and the boroughs of Steelton and Highspire (education).
Figure 1. Pennsylvania House District 104 Map

Source:


This white paper was developed as part of the course requirements for PUBPL 304W Public Policy Analysis at Penn State Harrisburg. It is the fourth in a series of collaborative research projects (Mallinson 2020, 2021, 2022). Students in the course learn about the policy process, policy analysis, and policy writing and this report is the culmination of an entire semester’s work. The first three reports were in collaboration with Dave Madsen when he was a member of Harrisburg’s City Council. Each year, a major topic facing the city was selected for students to coalesce around and offer well researched and actionable recommendations for the city. The aim has always been to leverage academic research and policy learning from other
cities to offer these recommendations. This partnership has continued with now Representative Madsen, but it has also broadened to not just consider issues in the city, but also potentially Steelton, Highspire, and Penn State Harrisburg. Additionally, the recommendations are now targeted to the Pennsylvania General Assembly, not Harrisburg City Council.

The following report presents each group’s findings and recommendations. Each section has a similar structure. Following a brief introduction of the problem(s) that the section addresses, the students evaluate specific social, economic, political, and structural environments in the city that cause and are affected by those problems (Birkland 2020). After this evaluation, possible solutions to the problem(s) are presented, evaluated, and specific recommendations are made. Students were strongly encouraged to provide creative sources of funding for their recommendations, as well as a timeline for implementation. Each section has been lightly edited by the professor, but they largely appear as the students wrote them. This is being presented as the work of the students and the professor. Nothing herein is the official opinion of the Pennsylvania State University.
Housing the Homeless in the City of Harrisburg

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Homelessness is a problem caused by several sources, with the most notable one being inadequate access to housing. Housing is a basic human need, in the same realm as food and water, as it is a critical need for any other aspect of living. Without the stability that housing creates, individuals cannot hope to play a part within their respective society. For some perspective, there were about 580,000 people homeless in the United States on a single night in 2020, according to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. This is also a local problem. On any given day, there are 15,000 homeless people in Pennsylvania (DCED 2023). In Dauphin County, homelessness has grown from 394 people to 460, which is approximately an 11% increase from 2011 to the most recent data of 2018 (CACH 2018).

Homeless encampments in Harrisburg have been an alternative shelter option for those without anywhere else to go. These encampments are not sanctioned, nor are they regulated by government entities. These encampments result in crimes like assault and overdoses. It is important to note that the crime itself did not come from the homeless but from others coming into the homeless encampment. The culmination of illegal activity and the health crisis due to the growing rodent population ultimately led to the closure of the Mulberry Street encampment at the Mayor’s orders (Bhargaw and Van Etten 2023). This eventually displaced many homeless people and scattered them into different local encampments or shelters.
All this to say, this is a pertinent issue that is affecting our community’s well-being, and we need to bring change before it gets worse. The leading cause of homelessness is the lack of available housing, caused by the literal lack of housing, or the cost of living (NAEH 2022). In this paper, we will examine the issue of homelessness in Harrisburg. We propose several solutions to the problem: the transfer of subsidized housing ownership, a non-profit owned housing model, and an expansion of the Housing First model. Ultimately, we recommend that Harrisburg turn towards non-profit Community Land Trusts to provide housing to the homeless.

**Context of the Problem**

Homelessness is something that happens across America. People become homeless for many reasons, but resources should be available to help them. According to the 2021 Census, the median income for a household in Harrisburg was $44,444. The city has a 28.2% poverty rate (Census Bureau 2023). Due to families and retirees migrating to Harrisburg the market for buying homes and renting has become tighter. There are also companies buying homes but not using them. There is no new construction for homes or apartments in Harrisburg, so there is little opportunity for people entering the city to get housing. Construction has come to a standstill; houses are being produced, but not at the needed rate (Brightman 2021). Homelessness in Harrisburg is a rampant problem that there are solutions to, but they are not fixing the problem. One of these solutions is the implementation of shelters in Harrisburg. There are many shelters in the Harrisburg area, including the Bethesda Missions Men’s Center and the Susquehanna Harbor Safe Haven. These shelters are open to anyone who needs them, but some homeless people do not wish to go to shelters. This leads to groups leaving supplies at homeless encampments, which can lead to more problems like rodents, bugs, and human waste. Groups leaving supplies at
encampments is becoming a more significant problem. The groups do not have a schedule for when they go to the encampments. so groups will come right after the other. This causes the supplies to build up because they are not all being used. The supplies then attract rodents and bugs. The city has to keep these encampments clean because, most of the time, they are on public property. The problem became so bad in the Harrisburg encampment that people started to refuse to clean up there.

There was a count of 760 people that were homeless in Harrisburg, PA, according to the 2019 Homeless Point in Time. There are multiple reasons why the homeless population is so large. The Harrisburg population is 50,267, which means 1.5% of the population is homeless. This is a substantial number due to the size and population of Harrisburg. Harrisburg is not an exceptionally large city, only 8.12 square miles. In the 2019 Point in Time, eviction due to nonpayment of rent was the main reason given for homelessness, followed by job loss and family breakup (CACH 2019).

Mental health and drug and alcohol use were the highest disabilities. In 2018, 110 adults, or slightly over one-third of the population of homeless people, suggested they have mental health concerns or diagnoses. Additionally, in 2018, 90 homeless people, or 28% of the homeless population, had a substance abuse disorder or concern. Twenty-four homeless people, or 7% of the homeless population, indicated their homelessness resulted from domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, or human trafficking. In 2018, 47 people, or 14% of the homeless population, were chronically homeless (CACH 2019). The Point in Time survey defined chronically homeless as individuals or families with a disabling condition who have experienced homelessness for 12 months, either consecutively or over four episodes in the past
three years. The Point in Time survey takes place over 9 years, so the answers do vary at some points in the survey. Only 6% of unsheltered people were employed in the 2018 PIT. Unsheltered, in this case, means homeless people who do not have a place to live other than on the streets, in vehicles, in abandoned buildings, etc. Over 50% of the unsheltered population received subsidized income such as SSI, SSDI, and Social Security.

Everyone did not reply to the income questions, but 33% were between $500 and 25% were greater than $1000. The respondents stated their reasons for homelessness as mental health and substance abuse, indicating 50% have a mental health disability. Many homeless people in Harrisburg are interested in finding work, with 50% indicating their interest. Twenty-seven percent of the people that lived in winter overnight shelters were already employed at the time of the PIT (CACH 2019).

Harrisburg has been quoted as being one of the nicest places to live in Pennsylvania. As of March 2023, Harrisburg, PA, had a population of 50,135, and 3.0% of this population is unemployed (BLS 2023). The largest employment sector in the Harrisburg area is education and health services. The biggest employer in Harrisburg, PA, is the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which employs 29,900 people. The COVID-19 pandemic weakened the economy. In fact, in 2020, nonfarm payrolls decreased by 15,200 jobs, or 4.3%. In the leisure and hospitality service, 40% of jobs were lost, which amounts to 5,900 jobs.

Employment availability is steadily increasing but still working at a limited capacity. Approximately 88% of the jobs lost in April were recovered by December 2020, but some of the losses were permanent. The unemployment rate was 7.7% in April 2020 and decreased to 5.3%
by December 2020. This continually decreased until it was 2.8% in December 2022. This has negatively impacted the housing market (Brightman 2021).

The housing marketing conditions in Harrisburg are strained. Due to the strong negative economic impacts of 2020 and the fact that there has been a low amount of new house construction since 2012, the housing market is not in a good place. Housing demand has increased while home construction is stagnant. Overall, home sales reached 8,525 in 2020, a 10% decrease from 2019. As of 2019, there has been an accelerated price growth in homebuying. An existing home in Harrisburg is $213,400, which is a 5% increase from the previous year. A new home will cost $338,100, which is a 3% increase from the previous year. As of January 2021, the overall sales vacancy in Harrisburg is 1.1%. The rental market is not much better; it is also strained. There is a rental vacancy rate of 4.7%. While developers have not been building new houses, they have been building new apartments. In fact, a proposal has been placed to build a seven-story apartment building on 430 Reily Street in Harrisburg (City of Harrisburg 2022).

Single-family homes are still a larger part of the rental properties in the Harrisburg area. 37.6% of the rental properties are single-family homes, and 21.6% of the rental properties are multi-family units (Brightman 2021). There is a gap between what homeless people can pay for a place to live and how much these places cost. The Point in Time Survey said that eviction due to non-payment is a reason that most people are homeless. There is also a crack in the system that some homeless people fall into. This gap is caused by making enough money to not qualify for government assistance but not enough money to be able to live. Most homeless people want a place to live, but it always seems out of reach, no matter how hard you work.
Solutions

With 14% of the population interviewed for the Harrisburg PIT being chronically homeless, there is an indication that the homeless population in Harrisburg continually face barriers to entry for obtaining housing. Emergency shelters and Transitional Housing programs within Harrisburg offer temporary housing. However, these programs are provided to specific subsets of the homeless population, do not account for the program's effectiveness, or mandate participation in specific programs. Similarly, participation in subsidized housing programs or existing non-profit permanent housing programs is difficult because of eligibility requirements based on income or demographic and dependence on landlord participation. Since the City of Harrisburg also contains homeless individuals who struggle with substance abuse and mental health, getting people into a stable housing situation is necessary to address these issues thoroughly and ensure that services are sufficiently provided. Adapting the ownership in federal and state-subsidized housing programs, using a non-profit-oriented housing model, and expanding on existing permanent housing models are solutions to housing the homeless population that involves the state and city governments and relevant local non-profit organizations.

Transfer of Subsidized Housing Ownership

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program, authorized under Section 8 of the Housing Act of 1937, is the federal government’s foremost program for housing low-income families and individuals. If individuals meet the eligibility requirements, housing is provided via the private market, where private landlords are paid a subsidy by the Public Housing Agencies (PHA) in exchange for offering accommodations (DHUD 2023). The Harrisburg Housing
Authority operates under this profit-based model, providing Section 8 housing to eligible individuals. A profit-based model introduces the need to make money and relies largely on landlords' voluntary supply of properties. Though the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act prevent discrimination based on race, color, national, religion, sex, disability, and familial status, neither includes protections from discriminating based on source of income or provisions about allowing HCVs. As there are no local voucher non-discrimination laws established in Harrisburg either, landlords within the city are legally allowed to reject housing vouchers and are not required to participate in the program at all. In order to prevent profit-based housing predation from providing homeless individuals with more permanent housing, we propose that the Harrisburg Housing Authority use its newfound participation in the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Moving to Work Program (MTW) to transition ownership of subsidized housing from landlords to itself gradually.

The Moving To Work program allows PHAs to design non-standard and local strategies to make housing choices more readily available to low-income and unhoused individuals (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.-b, MTW explanation section). As of Fiscal Year 2022, the Harrisburg Housing Authority is an official participant in this program under its 2022 expansion, functioning as a part of the Landlord Incentives Cohort. The Landlord Incentives Cohort program is concentrated only on evaluating the effect incentives have on landlord participation with HCVs. The Harrisburg Housing Authority plans to work on increasing participation by educating landlords on the benefits of renting to low-income individuals and the falsities surrounding possible deterrents for involvement (DHUD n.d., 9). However, this indicates that no concrete efforts are being taken to increase participation, and
HCVs are still being provided through a model that prioritizes financial gains for landlords. To ensure that discriminatory practices are not preventing homeless individuals from obtaining permanent housing, the Harrisburg Housing Authority should instead utilize the freedom MTW gives and transfer the financing and development of subsidized housing from the private market to the PHA.

Instating Harrisburg’s PHA and outside contractors as the owners of subsidized housing would remove the possibility of predation on homeless individuals, instead providing an objective entity that would protect unhoused people from discrimination. The King County Housing Authority (KCHA) is an MTW PHA in Washington state that provides rental housing and rental assistance to households within the metropolitan area outside of Seattle, servicing more than 55,000 people and administering 10,950 HCVs and 140 local, non-traditional units. The PHA contracts the management of its acquired housing units to companies through bank lines of credit, achieving significantly more affordable housing at lower rents (Kye, Mouton, and Haberle 2018) by using the acquired properties to provide empty units under HCVs (Haberle and House 2021, 75).

Through tax-exempt governmental purpose bonds, private activity bonds, and low-income housing tax credits, over 5000 units have been acquired from private owners in 25 years (Walls 2023). The Harrisburg Housing Authority could replicate this model and enlist the non-profits within the Capital Area Coalition on Homeless to help manage the properties. As the Harrisburg PHA has been officially classified as an MTW Housing Authority, the MTW funds that KCHA is allocated and the exemptions from some HUD regulations make it accessible to the Harrisburg PHA. The federal funding from HUD, including the MTW funds, that the state
receives is necessary to finance the transference of ownership and would make the process viable. With the help of the state, local government, and outside contractors, implementation of this solution at the smaller scale the Harrisburg PHA operates would be possible.

**Non-Profit Owned Housing: Community Land Trusts**

High housing costs, profit-based subsidized housing models that promote discrimination, and failure to meet eligibility requirements can prevent homeless individuals from obtaining housing through traditional government and local housing programs. Harrisburg still operates under a profit-based subsidized housing model through HUD, and the majority of local non-profits, including the Bethesda Men’s Mission, Brethren Housing, and YWCA, run programs that require individuals to either have graduated from or participate in their programs or be within a narrow subset of the homeless/low-income population (men, women, single women with children or expectant mothers, veterans, etc). Harrisburg could implement a more long-term and permanent housing solution by operating non-profit owned Community Land Trusts.

Community Land Trusts (CLTS) are nonprofit and community-centered organizations that acquire and supply housing to (typically) low-income individuals. The ownership of CLTs is held by the local organization permanently, and they lease the housing to tenants that live on the properties (Greenstein and Sungu-Eryilmaz 2005). CLTs are usually overseen by a board of directors that consists of leaseholders, people who live within the area, and local representatives from the community. By involving local community members and leaseholders with residents' interests in mind, the income and social-based discrimination that homeless individuals may face when trying to obtain permanent housing within profit-based models would be eliminated. In housing models where profit is a motivator, supplying housing is contingent on landlord
involvement; a landlord that does not provide housing because of income concerns or perceptions surrounding citizens on welfare is allowed to do so. The central focus is on keeping everything communally operated and providing more autonomy to the leaseholders through multiple functions, serving not only as a housing site but as a place for community gardens and recreational facilities (Green and Hanna 2018, 61). CLTs are a model that promotes de commodification, so profit is removed as a barrier to entry for homeless individuals. Using this model would remove the profit-driven model that relies on voluntary landlord participation, a problem with which the City of Harrisburg has struggled to the point of the City Council proposing a bill to ban housing discrimination several times within the last decade (Vendel 2016).

CLTs are typically funded through federal and state grants and private investment. Along with investment from private donors, The Community Block Development Program (CDBG) and HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) are options for federal funding that could be utilized for funding CLTs. CDBG and HOME are grants allocated to state governments and local communities to finance a range of affordable housing and community development projects. At the state level, the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) could be a potential funding source if federal funding is already being used. Under the Realty Transfer Tax Fund of PHARE, programs focused on creating new affordable rental units and developing innovative housing solutions are prioritized if other funding sources are already being leveraged. A CLT in Harrisburg focused solely on housing homeless individuals, without enforcing eligibility requirements, is a potential solution that also decommodifies the market.
Expansion of Housing First Approach

Housing First is a type of housing approach that focuses on providing immediate permanent housing to homeless individuals, giving them stable accommodations and necessities before finding employment or providing services for mental health and substance abuse (NAEH 2022). This approach removes the typical barriers of entry that homeless people face when trying to obtain housing, as individuals are not required to participate in a program or receive other services before being housed. A Housing First method can serve a wide array of people within the homeless population, ranging from chronically homeless individuals to those who are homeless due to temporary crises. The two most used models under the Housing First approach are Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and Rapid Re-housing. PSH housing, which is for people in vulnerable subsets of the homeless population (single mothers, people with substance abuse or mental health issues, disabled individuals, etc.) and those that are chronically homeless, is offered in Harrisburg by the Brethren Housing Association’s Side-by-Side Program, the Robert Jackson Veterans Center, Shalom House’s SHARP Program, Susquehanna Harbor Safe Haven, and the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg.

However, PSH programs focus very specifically on one of the vulnerable subsets and provide wholly for chronically homeless individuals. A focus on developing more programs based on the Rapid Re-Housing program would allow Harrisburg to supply housing to a greater number of people within the homeless population since housing would not be limited to just chronically homeless individuals.

Rapid Re-Housing serves a variety of homeless people, assisting them with rental assistance and services in the short term. The foremost objective of this model is to make sure
homeless people are given accommodations quickly without needing a documented history of homelessness, enabling them to stay housed and focus their efforts on receiving services for existing issues or acquiring employment. As a model that is based on the Housing First approach, acquiring housing through Rapid Re-Housing is not conditional, eliminating the pressures that may come from involvement in traditional transitional housing programs. Rapid Re-Housing has been proven to work, with only 10% percent of families leaving HUD’s Rapid Re-Housing for Homeless Families Demonstration returning to homelessness (Cunningham, Gillespie, and Anderson 2015). Based on the success rate of Rapid Re-Housing and the range of homeless individuals that can obtain housing from this model, we propose that the city and local non-profits should focus on developing more housing programs that utilize this model. The expansion of the Housing First approach can be funded through a combination of private investment, already accessible mainstream federal funding, and other state public funds.

**Evaluation of Solutions**

*Subsidized Housing Ownership Transfer*

The transferring of ownership of Section 8 to the Public Housing Authority (PHA) or the community is a viable option to address the housing/homeless problem in Harrisburg. The current model of providing housing through private ownership to homeless individuals presents a challenge. The financial incentive landlords have to enroll in the Section 8 program may still not be enough to get landlords to rent to unhoused individuals. Landlords also unofficially impose minimum income requirements that prevent homeless individuals from obtaining subsidized housing in the first place. By transferring the property to the city, landlord predation could be eliminated. However, there are still issues with transferring ownership. The long waiting periods
and limited housing quantities would still be present if the PHA took ownership. If not also addressed, the perceived increase in crime and potential damages incurred to buildings could still burden the city. Another challenge to transferring housing ownership to a PHA is the Faircloth Amendment. The Faircloth Amendment, passed on October 1, 1999, prohibits PHAs from having a net gain of owned or operated properties from when the amendment was passed (National Coalition for the Homeless 2023). However, Attachment D, Section D of its MTW agreement gives KCHA flexibility regarding the Faircloth Amendment and HUD regulations, allowing them to keep their Annual Contributions Contract (ACC) below the Faircloth limit, and management of the properties is done via outside contractors and non-profits.

Non-Profit Owned Housing: Community Land Trusts

Non-profit housing could be one of the most promising solutions to the homelessness problem in Harrisburg. Currently, non-profit organizations mainly focus on providing “stop-gap” shelters that immediately get people off the street and then find more permanent subsidized or rapid housing. However, Harrisburg should also look to non-profit organizations to provide more permanent housing. This can be provided through either investment from the non-profit itself by purchasing housing and then renting to only people in need, or by non-profit organizations aiding those in need. The former solution allows the non-profit to keep rent low and provides a stable living environment. The latter helps address the problem of those who fall right above the line or cannot afford to pay rent in full. Allowing CLTs to purchase or be granted unused property and provide housing eliminates two current problems associated with the voucher system. First, it eliminates predatory landlords that either take advantage of the city’s vouchers or the tenant's or
both. Second, CLTs eliminate the problem of the finite number of properties that the city is allowed to own and operate. CLTs are a very viable option, but they do also have setbacks.

The first problem with CLTs is the issue of taxation. A defining characteristic of CLTs is that the individual owns the home but leases the property that the home sits on. This creates a problem for tax assessors in determining who has to pay the taxes for the property that the home sits on (Kuka 2017). Another criticism of CLTs is that CLTs inhibit the primary way to build wealth in the US, home ownership (Kuka 2017). Because the individual does not own the property that the home sits on and restrictions are placed on the home's resale, some argue that this leaves individuals stuck in a CLT with no way out. The final factor that needs to be addressed with CLTs is the cost. The costs of CLTs vary with the cost of land at that time.

An example of a CLT that would be comparable if Harrisburg backed this option would be the State College CLT (SCCLT). Like many CLTs, the SCCLT is funded through donations. For example, the SCCLT received over one million dollars in grant funding from the Home Foundation (Fawcett 2021). This funding model frees the taxpayer from bearing the burden of housing while keeping the cost of housing low for the individual.

**Expansion of Housing First Approach**

The first part of expanding the Housing First model is the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) approach which has several benefits. These include immediately taking people off the streets and providing them with housing. Once housing is provided, services are offered. The PSH approach also keeps the costs on the taxpayer relatively low. On average, the taxpayer pays
$35,758 per year on a chronically homeless individual (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). PSH reduces taxpayers' costs by 49.5% (NAEH 2017). There are, however, downsides to this, such as ensuring payment of rent, safety of the tenants, and a constant turnover of tenants. Among those downsides, the main issue with the PSH approach is that it currently only serves the vulnerable population.

One specific Housing First approach, Rapid Re-Housing, is the more viable solution of the two Housing First models for addressing the homelessness problem in Harrisburg. The value that Rapid Re-Housing has is that the program does not screen individuals based on factors like mental health, drug abuse, or income. Because of this, Rapid Re-Housing is able to place people in homes almost immediately. The Rapid Re-Housing program also provides counseling services to assist households in getting back into a stable environment. Rapid Re-Housing also keeps the costs low. Compared to other housing models like emergency housing which costs $4,819 per month, Rapid Re-housing only costs about $880 per month (DHUD 2022). The downside to the rapid rehousing program is that it sometimes relies on pre-existing subsidized housing providers, and the downsides of subsidized housing come with that.

**Recommendation**

While all of these solutions are viable and have proven successful on some level, we recommend that Harrisburg turn towards non-profit Community Land Trusts to provide housing for the homeless. By using nonprofit CLTs, the city can keep its costs low and provide safe and effective housing and social services to the homeless in Harrisburg. While CLTs have downsides, such as taxation and personal wealth, we feel that these can be overcome. To solve the problem of property taxes, we propose that the city tax at the current low-income housing
rate. This way, the city can maintain a fair and equitable taxation scheme for all. Second, the issue of gaining wealth is misleading. CLTs were and are not designed to be an asset but instead be a viable option for low-income families and individuals who need a safe, secure, and affordable place to live, a place to eventually build up wealth and buy a home as an asset. The final problem associated with CLTs can be easily overcome is the acquisition of property. Currently, the city of Harrisburg has an estimated 4,000 vacant properties (Hardison 2018). CLTs could make great use of these properties by either repairing current homes and apartments or building new ones through federal and state grants. This not only helps the CLTs by providing them with property but also helps the city by helping to alleviate the vacant property problem.

**Conclusion**

The steps we choose to take in ending homelessness range, but they all come back to the idea of providing housing for those who do not have it. We must, as a community, come together and provide a standard of living that we can be proud of. The solutions provided are effective and proven to work for other cities across the United States, even when their application differs. Solutions like non-profit owned housing help to keep people off the street while still allowing the government to spend less to give homeless people safe and adequate housing. We must implement these solutions without discrimination against those whose social standing is not favorable. Making housing affordable and easy to acquire and maintain should be the first step to solving this issue.
Utilizing Existing Funding Opportunities to Reform Education in Steelton-Highspire

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Education contributes substantially to economic and social stability (Van Hecke 2014). There are many school districts in Pennsylvania where basic financial needs, like building maintenance or school supplies, can make or break a budget for that school. No young Pennsylvanian should have to attend a school district, who through no fault of their own, must choose between something like mold removal or school lunch quality. It is not a secret as to what causes these inequities: the school districts that are “better” exist in higher socio-economic environments than those that are not. Pennsylvania schools are principally funded by property taxes, which vary considerably and drive inequities in education. The intent of this paper is to present credible solutions to reduce the inequities in the education system but specifically focusing on the Steelton-Highspire school district.

Steelton-Highspire School District is one of many disadvantaged school districts found throughout the Commonwealth. It is an urban school district, serving the communities of Steelton and Highspire. It has a majority-minority student body and receives most of its funding from state and federal sources (2021-2022 Budget Summary). According to U.S. News and World Report, over 99% of the student body receives free lunches and only 63% of students will graduate, well below the state average (N.A. 2023b). The district ranks low in math and reading proficiency according to the U.S. News and World report in 2021. Steelton-Highspire would greatly benefit from education reform to give students a better opportunity to achieve success.
The aim of the chapter is to introduce viable solutions that can teach, empower, and add value to students, teachers, and most importantly, the communities that public schools serve. We will explore three potential solutions that the Pennsylvania General Assembly could consider. The first solution to education reform is the adoption of a New Jersey-style education reform: the Abbott plan. A second solution is an expansion of the school voucher program in Pennsylvania. A third solution is school district consolidation. Ideally, implementation of all three proposed solutions could vastly improve education in Pennsylvania, including for the students attending Steelton-Highspire.

The Context of the Problem

There are 500 school districts in PA, and they range in size from 200 students to 140,000. The sheer amount of school districts can make it difficult to distribute federal funding equally. It is widely discussed how unfairly funded Pennsylvania school districts are (Palochko, Merlin, and Wojcik 2019). Inequities occur because students are not receiving the same quality of education because their schools are not receiving equitable funding. The existing property tax structure that is in use to fund education “relies more heavily on local taxes than on state and federal money, the scales tip in favor of wealthier suburban districts” (Palochko, Merlin, and Wojcik 2019). This situation is no different from what is happening in the Steelton-Highspire school district. The Steelton-Highspire school district is made up of two schools, one teaching elementary aged students from grades kindergarten till the sixth grade. The second school in the district combines middle school aged students and high school aged students. Of these two schools “95.2% of students are economically disadvantaged” with a student population of 1,360 (N.A. 2023b).
In the Steelton-Highspire school district, there is a lack of funding which does not offer low-income students a fair chance to advance onto better opportunities. This is caused by its economic plight. Steelton’s population as of 2020 was 6,263. Steelton's median household income in 2020 was $45,599. The borough of Highspire has 2,741 people as of 2020. Highspire's median household income in 2020 was $46,348. This is below PA's median household income of $68,957 and below Dauphin County median household income of $66,454. Observing from census data, these two boroughs are both small in size (which means a small tax base,) and economically worse off compared to the rest of the county (Data.census.gov).

The Highspire school district was independent for 50 years before merging with Steelton in 1954. Soon after, the Steelton-Highspire High School opened in the fall of 1958. Since then, the district has faced many financial hardships and academic difficulties that could be due to the financial hardships. The Steelton-Highspire school district, there is a lack of funding which does not offer low-income students a fair chance to advance onto better opportunities. Further, there are important rifts within the district that complicate its progress. The “Highspire Education Coalition” has been petitioning to remove themselves from the Steelton part of the school district because they are underperforming on standardized testing and assessments. But they are not addressing the possible issues as to why their students are not performing well, like underfunding. According to the Steelton-Highspire school district’s superintendent, the district is underfunded by $9 million (Willson and Montag 2023) and has been in a deficit for 14 years. While reliant on property taxes and federal funds, 18.3% of people living in Steelton are living in poverty, which tightens the pool of possible resources for the district. Students are likely
underperforming because they do not have access to the tools that can help them achieve state standards.

Since March of 2013, Steelton-Highspire has been on the “School Districts in Financial Watch Status” which means that they have been found to be struggling economically and in need of help.2 The district requested help from the state after having “a delinquent real estate tax of 14.3% in the fiscal year 2011-12.” The help is given through financial resources offered by the state’s Department of Education in 2013 the district was provided with a “1.3-million-dollar advance.” Being on the financial watch list means that those districts need some assistance from the Commonwealth after being identified by the Early Warning System. The early warning system takes into consideration various factors like “fund balance ratio” being in the negatives at -13.6% which was based on their annual financial report from the 2011-12 fiscal year. These factors have put the district in its difficult situation, so the Department of Education offers solutions to help dig the districts out of their dilemma.

It is notable that in early 2023, the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court ruled that the current model of education funding in the state is unconstitutional. The Court ruled on several clauses touching on the disparities of education access to students in low property value areas, like Steelton-Highspire. Judge Renee Jubelirer ruled that the current system violates the state Constitutions Education Clause as well as the Equal Protection Clause. Pennsylvania’s system of education is different from other states because it is heavily based on property taxes. For example, in the state of Texas it “has a formula that calculates how to distribute funding based on

enrollment. Each district gets a base amount per pupil that goes up depending on different factors” (Hanna 2023). Instead of functioning the way Pennsylvania functions where the lower the cost of living in a given area generates less revenue than a more affluent area (Fitch 2021). This negatively affects low-income communities like Steelton-Highspire that has a population of about 8,986 people according to the 2020 Census Data. The Commonwealth Court’s ruling provides an open window for state government to reform school funding in ways that help districts like Steelton-Highspire (Kingdon 2011).

**Figure 2. Sources of Revenue for the Steelton-Highspire School District**


Figure 2 illustrates Steelton-Highspire’s funding sources. Most school districts in Pennsylvania are mostly funded by local sources. Steelton-Highspire is below state average and is mostly funded by state aid.
Solutions

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, we propose three solutions that could be effective in addressing the failures of educational funding in Pennsylvania. These would have benefits for Steelton-Highspire. The first solution that is most likely to succinctly address the financial disparities in the district is to adopt New Jersey’s model of “Abbott districts.” The New Jersey Abbott districts were designed to increase funding to low-income districts with faltering buildings, insufficient funding, and a lack of educational programs. The second solution is to increase awareness and accessibility to opportunity scholarships and tax programs. Currently, two programs help local students and businesses utilize tax programs to fund tuition at private or charter schools. School choice programs are becoming increasingly popular throughout the country for the opportunities they provide to students in underperforming school districts. Taking advantage of these programs will provide students with better education opportunities and push public schools to improve in order to retain students. The third solution is the consolidation of school districts in Pennsylvania. Specifically, combining the Steelton-Highspire school district with the Harrisburg and the Middletown Area school districts, which could pull more federal funding to this new combined school district. We will discuss each of these options in turn.

Abbott Plan

New Jersey faced a similar situation to Pennsylvania throughout the 1980s and into the early 2000s. Like Pennsylvania, New Jersey has pockets of wealthy suburban districts and disproportionately low-income urban and rural areas. A significant court case, Abbott v. Burke, established that the New Jersey funding formula, which was done on a per-pupil basis, was substandard for low-income areas (N.A. 2023a). New Jersey’s solution was the creation of
Abbott districts in 1985, which allocated extra funds for low-income school districts to help with construction costs. These were generally low-income, underperforming school districts that the state identified in need of extra funding to make up for lack of local funding. The Abbott plan, or New Jersey style of education reform, also involves the creation of an office within the state Department of Education (PDE.) Determining and addressing Abbott district is the sole responsibility of the Schools Development Authority (SDA) which is a separate department from the Office of School Facilities (OSF). The funding and resourcing for Abbott districts is undertaken by the SDA, and adequately performing schools have their own resources under the OSF.

The Abbott plans of New Jersey took years to fully address the funding concerns for the state. In 2008, New Jersey passed the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) to “rebalance” the previously abandoned Abbott formula. According to the New Jersey School Boards Association, “What the SFRA does is calculate the cost of providing each individual student an adequate education... [creating] a baseline cost. Then, there are various additional weights that may add to that cost. Factors such as limited English proficiency, poverty level and grade level are such additional weights” (Jones 2018). By the 2010s, legislation addressed the concerns of the designated districts and began appropriating additional funds to them. According to the New Jersey School Boards Association, “This legislation, in essence, does two things: repeals the enrollment growth caps immediately and; over a six-year period... phases out “overfunding” of certain districts to provide more funds to chronically underfunded schools” (Jones 2018). A formula is used to calculate how much is needed to provide each Abbott district with the necessary tools to conduct facility renovations and increase student performance.
The Abbot district model is finally showing some promise decades after the fight for fair funding began. Mandatory pre-kindergarten programs have shown significant improvements to students’ achievements through high school. A report from Early Childhood Research Quarterly shows that early educational intervention allows students to persistently learn more at a consistent rate (Barnett and Jung 2021).

Tax Credit Program

An alternative to increasing education funding across the state would be to utilize existing funds, namely those found through the school voucher program. In Pennsylvania, there is the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTCP) and the Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program (EITC). The OSTCP allows students in low-achieving schools to apply for scholarships in other public or private schools. Each year, the state designates which schools are in the bottom 15% of performance. Students in those districts are eligible to receive scholarships if they are residents of the failing school district and fall under the household annual income parameter. In the 2022-2023 school year, the household income had to be less than $105,183 and non-special education students could receive $8,500 in scholarships, whereas special-education students could receive up to $15,000 in scholarships. According to a 2021 report by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, school choice is utilized most by students who move and would have to change their zoned school districts (Cordes and Seifert 2021). School choice provides students the mobility to stay at the same school that provides necessary resources, such as sports, supplemental learning programs, and learning-disability support. This provides insight into students that may have to move frequently.
To put costs into perspective, according to data from the 2020-21 school year, Pennsylvania spent $19,919 per pupil, whereas the national average is $15,711 (Commonwealth Foundation 2022). In terms of public versus private school spending, the average cost of private school attendance in Pennsylvania is $11,570, whereas Catholic school averages between $4,000 for elementary school and $7,500 for high school (Hroncich 2021). These annual tuition rates are a fraction of the average public-school spending, and yet the opportunities do not garner more attention.

The EITC program establishes tax credits for businesses that contribute to scholarship organizations and educational improvement organizations. The tax credits are eligible for up to 75% of a business’s contribution, up to $750,000 per year. These two programs allow students in low-achieving schools to attend better-performing schools by supporting businesses that fund scholarships opportunities. These tax credits contribute to public funds made available for students to use towards tuition in other schools.

School District Consolidation

A third solution Pennsylvania could utilize would be school district merging. Instead of consolidating the school districts, it would be more beneficial to combine all the resources in the school districts. The Commonwealth has 500 school districts (Hardison 2019), while many of our neighboring states have far fewer like Maryland and Virginia. Merging school districts would cut down on administrative costs and maintenance on existing properties, while affording students more opportunities, since schools become more centralized.

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Pennsylvania once had over 2,000 school districts, but a nationwide wave of school district consolidation cut that number to 501. In brief, school district consolidation became a politically contentious issue. The state attempted numerous times prior to Act 561 to have school districts voluntarily consolidate. Naturally, this did not occur, due to fears of loss of local control. Governor David Lawrence and the General Assembly pushed through with education reform, and school district consolidation was included in Act 561 as a means to cut down on administrative costs and stretch tax dollars over a wider geographic area and population. Since the 1970s, only one school district has voluntarily consolidated (Leckrone 2015).

If policy planners wish to pursue this route for Steelton-Highspire, it is advisable that it be included in a wider effort of statewide school district consolidation. The most feasible consolidation route for Steelton-Highspire would be merging Steelton-Highspire with Harrisburg School District. Consolidating with Harrisburg School District would give Steelton-Highspire students a larger school budget, larger school facilities, and greater economic integration with the capital region. Both Harrisburg and Steelton-Highspire school boards would have to approve a merger, per the Pennsylvania School Code (Article II, Sec. 224).

Assessment of the Solutions

The creation of a New Jersey-style School Developmental Authority (SDA) in Pennsylvania would have both positive and negative consequences. Some challenges facing the plan are largely political. It involves legislation being passed by a politically divided General Assembly. Republicans and Democrats have starkly different views on education reform in the state. The creation of an office that will require additional funding for the PDE may not be politically appetizing to fiscally conservative legislators in both parties, particularly Republicans.
Another potential pitfall of the program is that it is not immune to recessions. According to a report by the Federal Bank of New York, New Jersey's Abbott districts experienced sharp decreases because of budget cuts from Trenton (Chakrabarti and Sutherland 2013). The question is, should lower-income school districts increasingly rely on non-local (state and federal) revenue sources, or should the state focus its efforts on economic development for those communities? This question will ultimately be answered by legislators and other state officials.

School choice programs allow students, parents, and scholarship benefactors to thrive in their chosen course of action. In fact, increasing the usage of vouchers would force public schools to create meaningful reform to retain their residents. A study published by the Cato Journal points out that, “Market pressures could change the supply of schools by enticing high-quality schools to open and persist while incentivizing low-quality institutions to either improve or close down” (DeAngelis and Erickson 2018, 250).

Increasing students’ access to school choice programs has shown improved test scores, increased graduation rates, and increased students’ likelihood of attending college (DeAngelis and Erickson 2018). Students in low-income areas that suffer lower funding rates than more affluent districts are disproportionately affected by poor educational conditions. Giving students the opportunity to attend schools outside of their residency, whether a magnet, charter, or private school, increases their educational experience and aids emotional well-being.

The greatest challenge to school choice is political feasibility, or lack thereof. Historically, Democrats have been against school choice voucher programs, while Republicans have generally been for it. Democrats cite opposition due to school vouchers doing little to improve public schools, and thus, undermining public schools. Even in Republican controlled
states, school voucher expansion has been stonewalled due to concerns like lack of accountability and potential negative impact on rural public schools (Bryant 2022).

School district consolidation has many potential benefits. According to the Allegheny Institute, “potential cost savings, economies of scale, enhanced educational offerings and elimination of duplicative functions” are benefits of school district consolidation. Considering the short distance between Steelton-Highspire and Harrisburg, and the already established institutional connections, like Capital Area Transit routes, consolidation with Harrisburg would further integrate Steelton-Highspire into the region.

Downsides to consolidation include uprooting a sense of local identity, lessening of local control, and general lack of political will. It was the first two objections that caused much political drama in the early 1960s that made school district consolidation a partisan issue, with Democrats for it and Republicans against it (Leckrone 2015). Different union contracts and pay differentials could also be another challenge presented to consolidation (Allegheny Institute 2018).

**Recommendations**

We recommend that the General Assembly utilize the first option. Implementation of the Abbott plan would involve the creation of a School Development Authority (SDA), an office that will specialize in identifying underperforming, low-income school districts, and will assist these school districts in funding shortfalls. It will also include funding that is earmarked to assist identified schools in building repairs. This office will help alleviate the considerable gap that exists between low-income and high-income school districts in budget expenses.
Additional recommendations include an expansion of the school voucher program, if political circumstances allow. We would not recommend property tax reform at this time. Such an overhaul of the funding mechanism would be too politically difficult to achieve. Establishment of an SDA and school voucher expansion would be easy first steps at education reform in the Commonwealth. Another solution that we recommend the General Assembly considers would be school district consolidation. Pennsylvania has over 500 school districts, which, while down significantly from a historic high of over 2,000, (Leckrone 2015) is still one of the highest counts in the nation. For example, Maryland has one school district per county (32 counties in all) and Virginia has 133 (Hardison 2019). An effort by the General Assembly to combine school districts would significantly cut down on administration costs (Hardison 2019), but again, like property tax reform, would most likely see considerable political resistance. Nothing is more unpopular than killing off the local school mascot.

**Conclusion**

How do we solve education gaps in Pennsylvania? Some school districts are better funded, achieve higher standards of academic success, and send a higher proportion of students to higher education than other school districts. It is not a secret as to why: the school districts that are “better” exist in higher socio-economic environments than those that are not. The goal of this paper is to research and present credible solutions that policy planners, legislators, and local government officials can employ to create an improved education system in the Commonwealth, that teaches, empowers, and adds values to students, teachers, and most importantly, the communities that public schools serve.
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