

# It's now or never for fixing Wilmington schools

Education series; Tony Allen and Dan Rich 3:22 p.m. EST December 18, 2015



(Photo: Supplied)

Today thousands of Wilmington children, most of them poor, black, or Latino, still do not have access to high-quality public education. Judged on most outcomes—test scores, truancy, graduation rates, college attendance, socio-emotional well-being, drug use, homelessness, arrests, and unemployment—these children have become data points for a system of failure.

## Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda, April 2015

*Editor's note: This week, The News Journal opinion pages have featured a series of essays written by members of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission. Read the series at [www.delawareonline.com/opinion](http://www.delawareonline.com/opinion). Submit your view to [letters@delawareonline.com](mailto:letters@delawareonline.com).*

For nearly three generations, state government leaders have not acted to strengthen public education in Delaware's largest and only metropolitan city. Instead, our leaders waited for the federal courts to impose remedies, and then they acted to dilute the impact of those remedies. The remedies have not worked. The school reforms driven by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, for the most part, also have not worked. Last week, the U.S. Congress essentially repealed No Child Left Behind, returning to the states the responsibility for initiatives to improve public education. The persistent failures of more than a half-century of reform have come at great cost to City of Wilmington students and these failures continue to limit the quality of public education across the entire state.



Dan Rich (Photo: Supplied)

Over the last 16 months, a community group of parents, students, teachers, district and charter representatives, and community leaders has worked passionately to chart a viable path for strengthening Wilmington education. The group completed a comprehensive analysis of the conditions of Wilmington public education and how those conditions affect student outcomes. One conclusion is indisputable. Consistently, on virtually all outcomes, middle and upper-middle class students—regardless of geography, race, or school district—do better than those who are low-income, and those who are low-income do significantly better than those who are low-income and live in the City of Wilmington.

## The Debate

There are many arguments as to why these realities persist. More often than not, one group blames another and demands greater accountability. That said, there are three recurrent and competing themes about the cause of poor outcomes for Wilmington students. Each theme points to a different issue and a different solution. The first position focuses on problems Wilmington students may face at home and in their neighborhoods, problems that many believe cannot be overcome in the classroom. Some advocates of this view regard school-based interventions as misguided and doomed to failure. Others, however, call for greater attention to helping schools meet the needs of students in poverty. The second position is that government leaders have never accepted responsibility for addressing the problems of poverty and are not committed to providing the resources educators need to make a difference for all students at risk. Advocates of this view believe more political will and funding are needed. The third position is that the fragmented nature of our current governing structure (e.g., too many districts and charters with far too little collaboration) prevents any action to strengthen public education as a whole. This view focuses on streamlining governance and consolidating responsibility for education improvements. It has become clear that all three of these positions present significant challenges that must be addressed. It also is clear that none of these challenges can be effectively addressed with piecemeal reforms, holding one group accountable to another, or introducing patchworks in public education funding.

Simply put, a comprehensive effort is essential.

## The Plan

For the first time in decades, a comprehensive action agenda to strengthen Wilmington schools has a broad base of support. **[Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda](https://sites.udel.edu/cas-weic/files/2015/08/weac-final-book-2015-web-uxn0ge.pdf)** (<https://sites.udel.edu/cas-weic/files/2015/08/weac-final-book-2015-web-uxn0ge.pdf>) served as the basis for legislation to establish the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission. The Commission has the mandate to carry out the recommendations outlined in the report and also to advise state leaders on how best to support the increasing number of schools throughout Delaware with high concentrations of low-income students, English language learners and other children at risk, including young children with special education needs.

Separate legislation authorized the State Board of Education to alter district boundaries in northern New Castle County in a manner consistent with the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee recommendations and based on a comprehensive transition, resource, and implementation plan developed by the Commission.

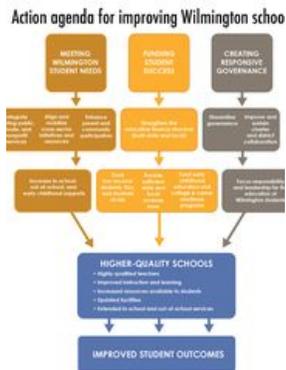
The detailed redistricting plan was submitted to the State Board of Education on Thursday and it is posted at the Commission's website: [www.solutionsfordelawareschools.com](http://www.solutionsfordelawareschools.com) (<https://sites.udel.edu/cas-weic/files/2015/12/WEIC-Draft-121515-sm-1abypow.pdf>). The State Board will act on the plan in its entirety on Jan. 21, 2016. If approved, the implementation of the plan will be subject to confirmation by a joint resolution of the General Assembly that must be signed by the governor. The plan calls for the movement of Wilmington students and schools out of the Christina School District and into the Red Clay Consolidated School District at the beginning of the 2018–19 school year. If this happens, governance will become more coherent. One district, Red Clay, will have responsibility for the majority of the public school students in the City of Wilmington.

But changing district boundaries will not in itself change student outcomes. Redistricting must be accompanied by the allocation of additional resources to support the needs of low-income students, English language learners, and other students at risk. This investment should begin in Wilmington and then extend across Delaware. Currently, Delaware is one of only 15 states that does not allocate funding for low-income students even though at least half of Delaware students are low-income. Delaware is one of four states that does not allocate additional funding for English language learners even though these students are the fastest growing segment of our student population. The necessary additional funding can be provided over a number of years, starting with the schools and districts affected by redistricting and then expanding statewide.

Over time, the commission's plan calls for a new weighted-student-funding allocation system that can more effectively and efficiently address the diverse needs of all Delaware students. While additional funding is needed, the burden of support should not fall on local taxpayers in the districts affected by redistricting. No Red Clay or Christina taxpayer should bear any undue tax burden because of redistricting. The needed funding must be addressed predominantly as a state obligation.

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Redistricting and additional targeted funds are essential, but much more will be needed. Three streams of action are required: creating responsive governance, funding student success, and meeting the full-range of Wilmington student needs in-school and out-of-school. Progress on all three streams is needed to support higher-quality schools, attract and retain high-quality teachers, improve instruction and learning, and generate improved student outcomes.



Action agenda (Photo: Supplied)

The Commission's proposal is not a quick fix. It is a solid and achievable plan borne of the most transparent process our community has ever seen. It builds upon proposals that have been made by earlier task forces to improve Wilmington education. It is based upon extensive research about what is needed and what works to end the cycle of poverty and to provide educators in our schools with the resources to better support student learning. It addresses key state priorities, from investing in early childhood education to eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline. It has the support of a broad and growing coalition of parents, educators, community and business leaders, student advocates, and government officials.

### Doing Nothing

Some have argued that we just can't afford to do what is needed and that we already spend too much on public education. As in the past, we could decide to do nothing. But you can be assured that if we do "nothing," the costs to our state and its taxpayers will surely rise to levels that are unsustainable; low-income students across the state will continue to struggle; rates of incarceration and recidivism will reach unprecedented levels; and Delaware, and its central city, will be increasingly less attractive to employers, large and small. All of this is substantiated by the recently released report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [Elevated Rates of Urban Firearm Violence and Opportunities for Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6312a1.htm). <file:///C:/Users/CNBKH8GK/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/Content.Outlook/CNST>.

The time is over for putting off action, waiting for a better plan, screaming no money, or blaming the students, their parents or their teachers for a system that is unable to meet student needs. The time to act is now. Johnny Means, a high school student who serves on the Commission, has summed it up, "[State leaders] need to do something. They need to say they agree or not. They need to say what needs to be done, what they like or not like. Something has to be done."

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