

The Wilmington Education Strategy Think Tank

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

Dear Dr. Allen & Wilmington Education Improvement Commissioners,

We, the members of the Wilmington Education Strategy Think Tank (WESTT) appreciate the depth of the work that has been put into the Commission's Interim Plan "Redistricting in the City of Wilmington and New Castle County: A Transition, Resource and Implementation Plan".

As you know, our group of concerned citizens has been working since 2013 to develop, prioritize and advance specific goals for the benefit of Wilmington students, including (1) the reduction of districts that serve the city, (2) the development of an equitable, weighted funding formula addressing student need and (3) the establishment of an authoritative role for Wilmington in the continuous improvement of the education of its residents.

We were pleased to see these priorities reflected in the WEAC recommendations earlier this year, and in endorsing WEAC's Action Agenda, we committed to supporting viable action steps and resource oriented proposals. The ideas presented here and our ongoing work are evidence of that commitment.

WESTT supports the Commission's Plan with conditions. We believe there are several key principles that must be the foundation of the ongoing work of the Commission, State, and the General Assembly for any plan to succeed. Our continued support will be based on indication that these are accepted and pursued.

- **RESOURCES FIRST:** The transformation of the structure of school funding to be weighted towards student need is critical and achieving this must take precedence in the 2016 legislative session.
- **ADDRESS CONCENTRATED POVERTY:** The transformation of the structure of school funding to be weighted towards student need is critical and achieving this must take precedence in the Governor's recommended budget and in the decisions made during the 2016 legislative session.
- **COMMITMENT TO EQUITY:** Policies to ensure equity must be central to any process moving forward, at every level (district to state).
- **NO OPTING OUT:** Colonial and Brandywine School Districts' status quo positions are unacceptable.
- **GET THE METRO DISTRICT RIGHT:** A consolidated metropolitan (city/county) school district is highly desirable but we feel further deliberation is needed regarding its ideal configuration to ensure the above priorities are pursued.

We have included a table on page 3 to further explain these positions and have attached reports on WESTT's position on school funding reform.

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We take seriously our responsibility to facilitate the best possible opportunities for our youngest citizens to succeed. We thank the members of the Committee for doing the same and seeing the value in our expertise. We look forward to continuing to work together toward these ends.

Sincerely,

The Wilmington Education Strategy Think Tank

Raye Jones Avery
Executive Director, Christina Cultural Arts Center

Nnamdi Chukwuocha
Wilmington City Councilman & Chair of Education, Youth & Families Committee

Theopalis K. Gregory, Sr.
President, Wilmington City Council

Shannon Griffin
Community Organizer, ACLU of Delaware

Lynne Howard
Consultant, Christina Cultural Arts Center

Jacqueline Jenkins
Chief Strategy Advisor, Office of the Mayor of the City of Wilmington

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Chief Executive Officer, Pritchett Associates

Jea P. Street
New Castle County Councilman

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PRINCIPLE	SUPPORT & SOLUTIONS
The transformation of the structure of school funding to be weighted towards student need is critical and achieving this must take precedence in the Governor's recommended budget and in the decisions made during the 2016 legislative session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding reform has been sought, unheeded, for at least two decades. Because so much hinges on this improvement, it must be prioritized regardless of progress in other aspects of the plan.¹
The continued proliferation and maintenance of schools with highly concentrated poverty and inequitable distribution of resources is unacceptable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant inequities persist for Wilmington students, from the quality of food served in their cafeterias to the availability and integrity of school infrastructure in their communities. • Policies that inefficiently compound disadvantage must be rethought. This includes aspects of Choice/Charter implementation² and review of the constitutionality of the Neighborhood Schools Act.³
Policies to ensure equity must be made central to any process moving forward, at every level (district to state).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little will improve without authentic commitment to equity from schools and districts serving Wilmington students. • This includes an examination of a number of policies which often play out inequitably, such as disciplinary practice⁴ and the flexibility of building-level decision-making. • A city-based education office would be a critical component in this.
Colonial and Brandywine School Districts' status quo positions are unacceptable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This current inaction stands in the way of the reduction of districts sought for Wilmington, causing concern about their motivations. The appropriate role of each must continue to be considered. • Wilmington students should not have to be assigned to schools outside of the city limits for the entirety of their education.
A consolidated metropolitan (city/county) school district is highly desirable but we feel further deliberation is needed regarding its ideal configuration and next steps to ensure the above priorities are addressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While consolidating CSD's Wilmington schools into Red Clay is a step in the right direction, it garners concerns the arrangement is doomed to fall short of goals if it stops there. • There are other options to be reconsidered as next steps, which are desirable and potentially more effective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Expand the metropolitan district by consolidating both Red Clay and the Brandywine into one district.⁵ ○ Establish a single County-wide school district.

¹ WESTT Edunomics Report (2015) – see attached.

² ACLU: OCR Complaint (2014)

³ Neighborhood Schools Report (2001)

⁴ ACLU: Coalition for Fair & Equitable Schools purpose statement (2014)

⁵ Neighborhood Schools Report (2001)

The Wilmington Education Strategy Think Tank: Fair & Adequate Resourcing of Schools

The Wilmington Education Strategy Think Tank (WESTT) was established in early 2013 - predating the establishment of the initial Wilmington Education Advisory Committee (WEAC) - as a collective of city leaders from nonprofits, government and the school system, to focus their efforts on specific frontiers of systemic improvement, with the well-being of Wilmington students in mind. The following issues were prioritized:

1. Governance Reform as it affects Wilmington students
 - a. Stronger city voice and oversight role in public education through the formation of an education and public policy office.
 - b. Consolidation of districts serving Wilmington
2. Achieve Fair & Adequate Resourcing of Schools as it affects Wilmington students

The members of the WESTT have appreciated the process initiated through the WEAC and the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (WEIC). In response to the draft report released in January 2015, we offered our feedback and proposals through a letter and attachments dated March 15, 2015, which can be found in the Appendix of WEAC's *Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda*. One aspect of the recommendations of which we were particularly supportive was **"the development of an equitable, weighted funding formula addressing student need"**, with the understanding that student need in Wilmington, while acute and a priority for us, is reflective of student need throughout the state of Delaware, particularly similar to those of Dover and Seaford. Real improvements would benefit all students.

We also expressed, at that time, that our group had "already retained a consultant to aid us in crafting proposals for a weighted student funding formula, with the support of the Mayor's Office and Wilmington City Council" in cooperation with New Castle County Government, the United Way and the ACLU of Delaware. That report was delivered to us by the Ednomics Lab of

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Georgetown University in June 2015, and we shared it with a number of stakeholders, including superintendents, principals and the DSEA to receive their feedback. We feel prepared at this time to share some of what we learned throughout the process, to assist in the forward momentum of the effort. In the following pages, we wish to draw attention to highlights of the research and share our own recommendations derived from that evidence.

We take seriously our responsibility to facilitate the best possible opportunities for our youngest citizens to succeed and are happy to be able to play a part in achieving this for students in Wilmington and throughout the state of Delaware. We thank the members of the Commission and its committees for doing the same and seeing the value in our expertise. In advance, we thank the State Board of Education, General Assembly, Department of Education and Governor for their efforts in this regard, as well. We look forward to working together toward these ends.

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Christina Cultural Arts Center*

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Michelle Taylor
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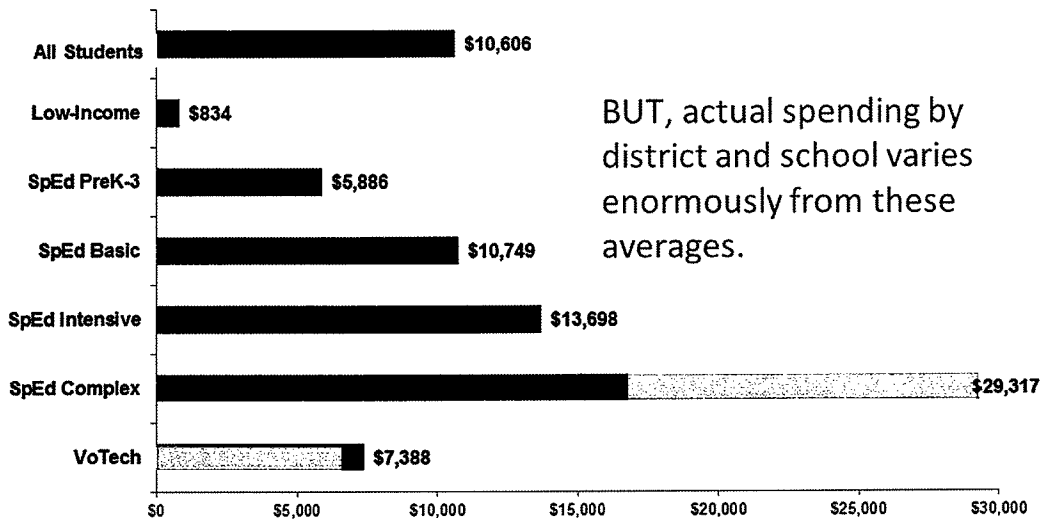
Selected Edunomics Study Findings

The most striking results from the research showed us that

1. The **current funding structure drives inequities** both across districts and most strikingly, within districts across schools: often, less is spent on our urban schools with high need.
2. There is a **weak connection between school expenditures and school outcomes**, even when the demographics are similar: not only are resources unevenly distributed, nor are they being utilized effectively.



How much money is available in Delaware for public schooling from fed, state, & local sources?
(Figures represent state-wide averages with increments by student type)



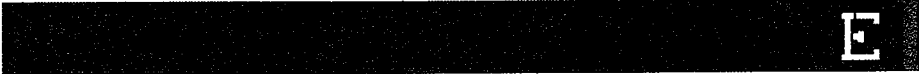
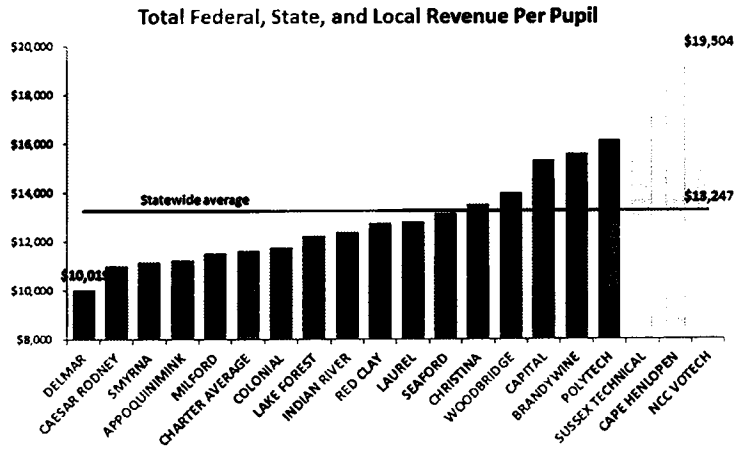
BUT, actual spending by district and school varies enormously from these averages.

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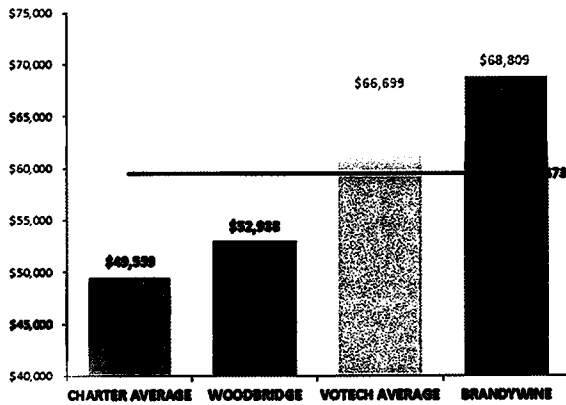
Evidence of INEQUITY from Edunomics Study: Per Pupil Expenditure & Average Teacher Salary



In practice, funds per pupil vary substantially across districts.

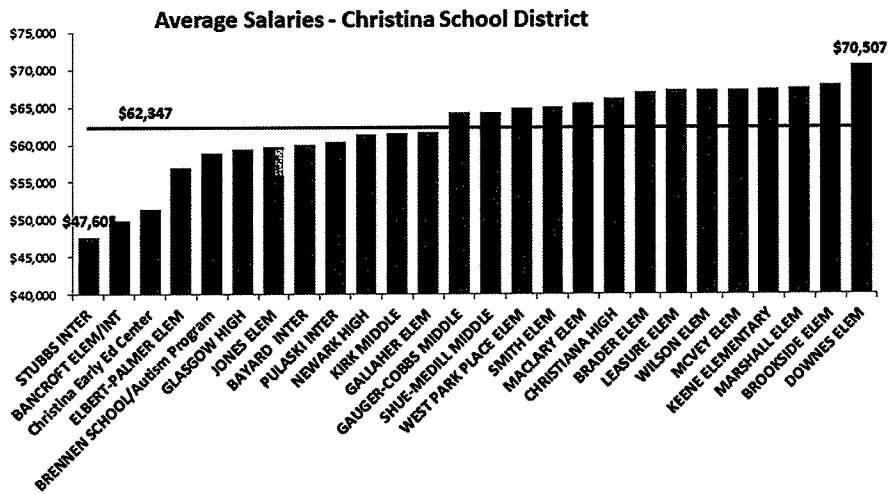


Average Salary All Full Time Teachers

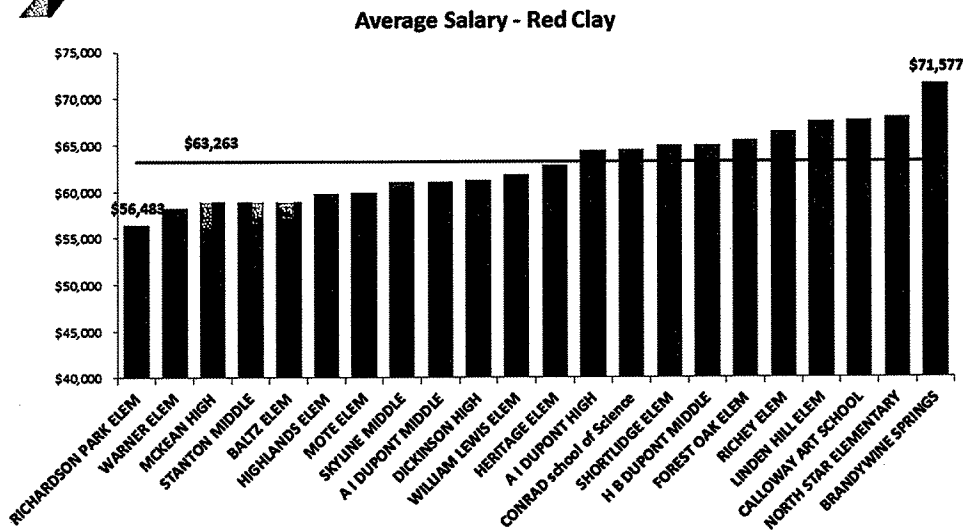


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Evidence of INEQUITY from Edunomics Study: Average Teacher Salary within Districts



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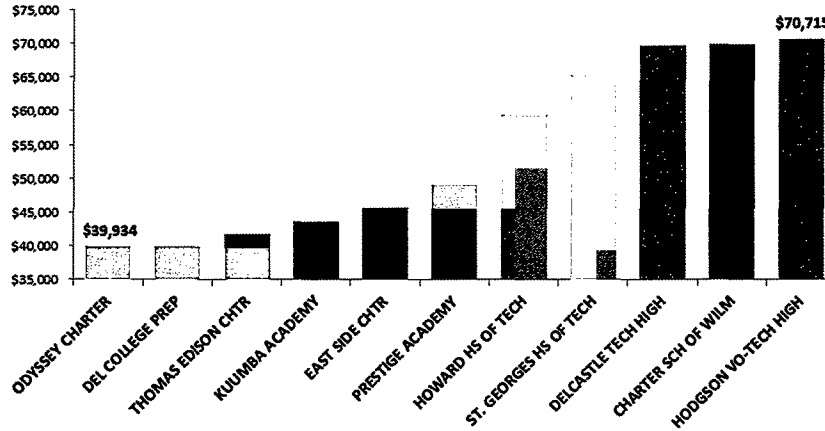
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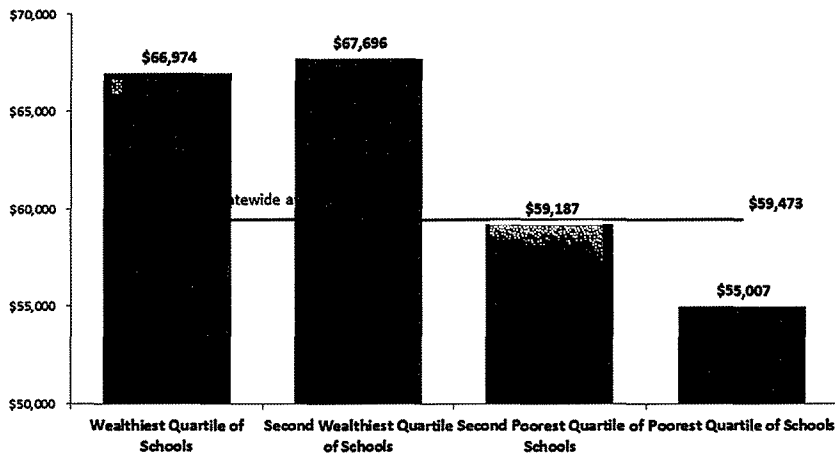
Evidence of INEQUITY from Edunomics Study: Average Salary by School Types & Poverty Levels



Average Salary -Wilmington Charters and NCC Votech



Average Salary by % of L-I Students - School Level

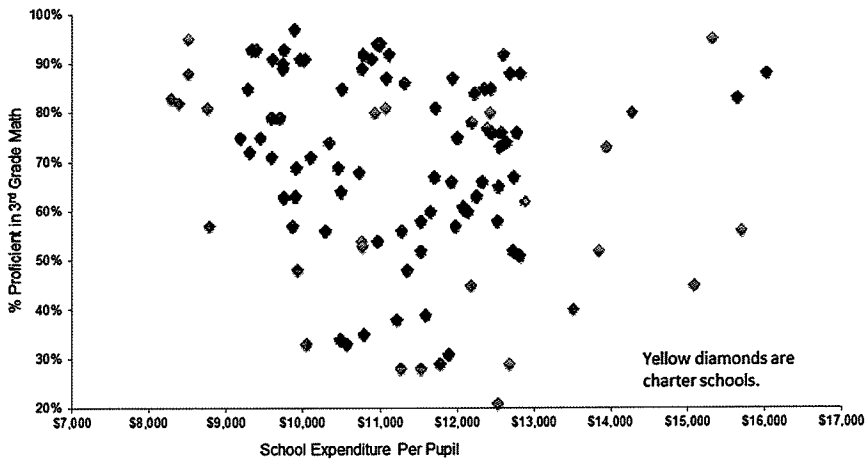


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Evidence of INEFFICIENCY from Edunomics Study: Weak Link between Spending & Outcomes



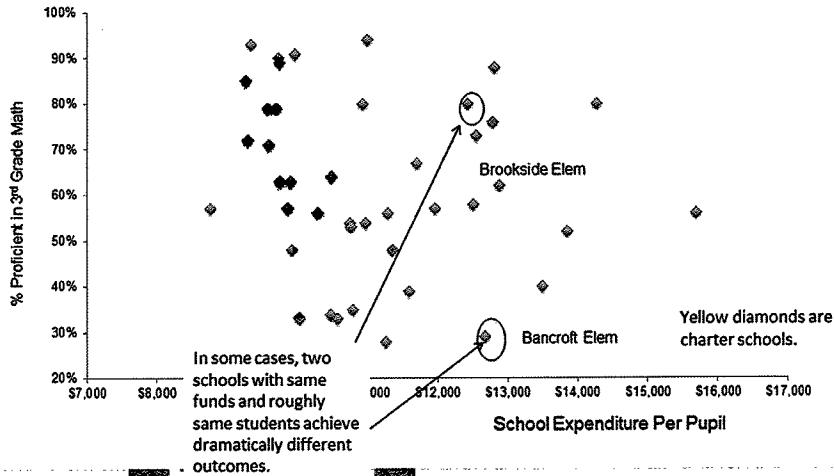
Poor Relationship Between Spending and Outcomes



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Only Schools Between 50% and 70% Low-Income



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Key WESTT Recommendations

After consultation with a variety of stakeholders (superintendents, principals and the DSEA), WESTT has concluded that the best path forward is to focus urgently on the following recommendations:

1. **Immediate adoption of a student-weighted unit funding approach**. We support the current direction of the WEIC Funding Student Success Committee to address the lack of adequate funding for higher needs students through the existing unit count system, by devising greater weights for low income and ELL students, as is currently done for students with disabilities. We would ask them to reflect the following considerations in their recommendations:
 - a. There be an **assessment of the need to include additional factors** beyond low income and ELL status, i.e. Trauma Intervention and Academic Intervention factors as we define in our exploration of a complete set of weight factors in Appendix A.
 - b. That there is recommendation for some **mechanism to review regularly** that the weighting factors, weights and retaining a unit-based structure are flexible, effective & efficient in improving equity.

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2. **Improved transparency of state, district and school-level expenditures and**

resources. In this way, the public may better understand the connection between expenditures and outcomes, and better hold the Department of Education, districts and schools appropriately accountable for their effectiveness.

- a. Success should be **a more equitable landscape of resources supporting students and those that teach them**, remedying the difficulty of recruiting and retaining excellent teachers for high needs environments. This could include the adoption of the Opportunity Dashboard model currently proposed by the NEA¹ and supported by DSEA, which showcases real school level resources.
- b. The goal of such **funding revisions and transparency should be focused on finding opportunities for the greatest efficiencies**. This could include the development of differentiated compensation opportunities for teachers in high needs schools as explored by the Committee to Advance Educator Compensation and Careers (CAECC)², to support success.

¹ See: <https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA-Opportunity-Dashboard.pdf>

² See: <http://caecc.us/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/CAECC-Provisional-Recommendations-June-2015.pdf>

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Governance Reform: More to Come

WESTT is supportive of proposals for governance reform in the form of **redistricting** and **charter/district collaboration** with the long-term aim of developing a stronger metropolitan Wilmington district (inclusive of the city and some or all of the surrounding county) encompassing all of the diverse school types.

WESTT strongly supports the **establishment of a governance and accountability voice for the City of Wilmington, through an Office of Education and Public Policy**, an objective which is supported by the Office of the Mayor, recognizing that a viable funding source must be identified for such a project to proceed.

Further details of WESTT's support and clarifying recommendations are to be covered in a separate report to be released in the coming weeks.

APPENDIX A

The following weight-categorization list has been drawn from formulas used in Boston and New York City, and are outlined here to inspire discussion regarding the areas of need as observed by leaders in Delaware schools. While most categories are self-explanatory, several (marked with an *) are proposed risk categories which require a fuller definition and exploration, defined below.

Trauma Intervention Factors:

This is a category the group felt was critical to define and include in any formula intended to do the job of meeting student needs, and could include weights for

- Family Supports
- Policy Factors (rates of crime, incarceration, income, unemployment, disparate health/environmental factors)³

Academic Intervention Factors:

This is a category which can continually respond to the changing needs of a student in direct reflection of their academic need. This could include weights for

- Below grade level performance on state tests; Dropout risk
- Interrupted learners (suffering gaps of educational process)

NOTE: In districts using SBA, the factors in the formula, and their weights, are frequently revisited. The formula is sometimes used in a hybrid manner, in conjunction with a “school foundation” – all schools receiving base unit funding to cover core administrative and other required roles) with the weighted funding provided “on top” of flexible funding.

³ See the recent CDC report on factors influencing gun violence in Wilmington:
<http://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/crime/2015/11/03/cdc-wilm-target-risk-youth-more-services/75085884/>

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Category		Potential Weight Factors	
Grade	Pre-K		
	Kindergarten		
	Grades 1-2		
	Grades 3-5		
	Grades 6-8		
	Grades 9-12		
Students with Disabilities	Low severity		
	Moderate severity		
	High Severity	Autism	
		Developmental Delay	
		Early Childhood Ages 3-4	
		Early Childhood Ages 5-6	
		Emotional Impairment	
		Full Inclusion - High Complexity	
		Intellectual Impairment	
		Multiple Disabilities	
Physical Impairment			
Sensory Impairment - Vision			
Specific Learning Disability			
English Language Learners	PreK-5 ELL Beginning		
	6-8 ELL Beginning		
	9-12 ELL Beginning		
	All Grades ELL Advanced		
High Needs Students	Trauma Intervention*		
	Academic Intervention*		
Poverty	SNAP/TANFF		
	Poverty Concentration (>60%)		
Vocational			