

Citizens rally for equity in education at Trenton state house

By [Penny Ray](#), The Trentonian

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During Sunday's rally at the state house, educators, lawmakers and community activists spoke about the importance of fully funding Trenton's public education system. (Penny Ray - Trentonian)

TRENTON >> Hundreds of people shut down West State Street Sunday afternoon during a Rally for Equity where local lawmakers, educators, clergy and community activists urged citizens to fight to save the city's public education system.

“Contact this governor and tell him to get off the campaign trail, to dump Trump and to worry about our kids instead,” Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer/Hunterdon) said to a cheering crowd as he stood in front of the state house next to several other lawmakers. “We’re on board to make sure everyone gets a fair and efficient education despite the cutbacks by his administration.”

Over the past two years, more than 320 jobs have been cut from the Trenton Public Schools system [due to budget shortfalls](#). Educators argue that the expansion of charter schools in Trenton

and throughout the state have crippled the public education system because public schools are increasingly sending money to charters even though the funding for public schools remains flat.

Trenton public schools are partially funded by local taxes, but the majority of the budget is provided through state and federal aid. If a parent chooses to send their child to a charter school, that money follows the student. Sometimes students will return to the public school system before completing a full year at the charter school. But the money often stays with the charter school, depending on which month the child returns to the public school system.

“The governor and his political cronies are flat-funding us and not giving public schools the money we need,” Trenton Education Association President Naomi Lafleur said. “Public schools and charters are very unequal. There’s no equity when we’re getting the same amount of money in state aid that we received several years ago. They keep expanding the charter schools and taking money away from public education, but they’re not increasing the amount of money we receive. And that’s why we continue to lay-off people.”

According to numbers provided by the public school district earlier this year, an additional 356 students will attend charter schools next year, which is an increase of 14 percent from the current school year. For the 2016-17 school year, the district will send \$37.6 million to charter schools, which is an increase of six percent from this year.

No new charter schools are scheduled to open in Trenton next year, but many of the schools currently in place have expanded grade levels. During Gov. Chris Christie’s tenure, the Republican governor has advocated the expansion of charter schools in urban cities throughout the state.

“Charter schools offer a unique opportunity for students, but it’s at the expense of the public school kids,” Gusciora said. “Money is being taken out of the public schools system, which has a mission to teach everyone regardless of special needs or behavioral problems, and then given to an organization that cherry-picks students.”

Besides the fact that money is taken from public schools to fund charters, one of the main arguments against charter schools is that students with behavioral issues are often sent back to the public school system, but the money remains with the charter school for that year.

In addition, the pressure to reduce costs at charters often results in a lack of staff necessary to serve special education students at charter schools. That in itself exacerbates the problem because while some charter schools are not equipped to educate students with special needs, teachers who have those qualifications are being laid-off from the public school system.

“All 92 of our paraprofessionals are being laid-off and 90 percent of them live and work in Trenton,” Lafleur said. “They’re homeowners who are now wondering how they’re going to pay their bills, how they’re going to care for family members who are ill and no longer have health insurance. These layoffs are hurting this community at-large. It’s destroying our schools and it’s taking away the little tax base the city does have.”

Lafleur said Trenton's current special needs population far exceeds the amount of funding the city receives for special education. She also said the city doesn't have enough resources to properly educate newcomers who speak English as a second language.

"They're decimating our public school system," Lafleur said.

The Trentonian spoke with several lawmakers and educators at Sunday's rally and they all said their main complaint against charters has nothing to do with the quality of education provided at those institutions, but rather the budgetary issues that accompany charter school expansion and how it depletes the resources at public schools.

"We have some amazing charter schools in Trenton, but there's a public school system that educates the vast majority of students in this city and we can't short change them," Gusciora said. "There has to be some ground rules about how many charter schools a community can have. And if students fail in a charter, they shouldn't be replaced. When kids are reabsorbed into the public school system, it's disruptive and costly in the end."

Community activist Darren "Freedom" Green addressed the crowd in front of the state house and talked about how the lack of educational resources exacerbates poverty in the capital city.

"Children birthed into poverty live in a continuous state of trauma and anxiety," Green said. "When you don't deal with the needs of children who are constantly living in fear, how can they focus on education? When you keep cutting funds and resources needed to provide kids what they need, the children are left out there by themselves."