

Opinion: For Wilmington schools, the struggle continues. But there is reason for optimism.

[Matthew Albright](#), Delaware News Journal | Published 8:00 a.m. ET Jan. 17, 2019

Tony Allen is chairman of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, a gubernatorial appointment he took in 2014. He is stepping down from this post at the end of the month as he continues in his role as executive vice president and provost at Delaware State University.



Just over a decade ago, during the 2008 presidential campaign, former first lady and founder of Public Allies Chicago Michelle Obama visited Delaware State University, stumping for her husband. That day, surrounded by hundreds of students and faculty, she said, “Fixing education shouldn’t be that tough. We know good schools, the schools that educate all their students, when we see them. So what we have to do is figure out how to replicate what those schools do across the entire country.”

After four years chairing the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, I now understand that the former first lady was actually issuing a complex challenge.

Tony Allen (Photo: Courtesy of Delaware State University)

We do know what high-functioning schools in high-needs areas look like. But it’s not just about replicating schools. The real issue is how to address the structural conditions that prevent us from meeting the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable children.

The facts are persistent and completely unforgiving.

The commission became necessary because [11,500 city of Wilmington children](#) are performing far worse than any other students in Delaware. In English/language arts, [74 percent of them fail to meet state standards](#); in math, [that failure rate is 83 percent](#).

In the face of such need, some suggest that urban poverty makes it impossible, or at least too costly, to provide an adequate education. We believe, however, that the challenges of access should never be allowed to supersede the fundamental right to receive a quality education, nor society’s responsibility to deliver it.

[Gov. John Carney proposes \\$60M in weighted funding for Delaware public schools](#)

[Opinion: Delaware is up to the challenge of fixing our school funding system](#)

Analysis: [School funding court case could be biggest since desegregation](#)

All of these children are citizens of Delaware's only metropolitan city, yet their schools are divided between [five districts and multiple charter schools](#) to such an extent that the Delaware Department of Education did not even maintain statistical data on them as a group. Child poverty rates are high, the turnover of experienced teachers in those schools is extreme, and the city of Wilmington has no direct voice in the educational policies impacting its most vulnerable citizens.



No state can afford to have the children of its central urban center so abandoned and expect to prosper as a vital part of the smaller, more interconnected world that digital technology and a smart economy are constructing at a rapid pace.

This is not an issue that has gone unnoticed: The commission is the fifth successive entity tasked to address the problem since 2001. This commission, however, was consciously composed of a representative cross-section of Wilmington parents, educators and political leaders and empowered to listen, ask its own questions and make independent recommendations.

Students at Stubbs Elementary School in Wilmington.
(Photo: Ambre Alexander Payne, University of Delaware)

The commission published significant reports in [2015](#) and [2016](#), based on strong qualitative and quantitative evidence and including the specific legislative recommendations to clear away 60 years of institutional underbrush limiting our educators' ability to improve student outcomes:

- Streamline the governance of the schools serving the city of Wilmington.
- Mobilize state agencies and resources within a comprehensive plan to support our most impoverished children.
- Build a new state education funding formula with a weighted distribution of resources to the schools and students where the need is greatest. In our estimation, that need was specifically important for low-income students across the state; English Language Learners; and students with special needs, particularly in K-3 elementary students.

These recommendations became the epicenter of [hundreds of forums](#); citizens spoke on both sides of the debate, and school districts expressed concerns that they would lose money or be burdened by an additional influx of students who would change the performance and demographics of their schools. These issues formed the crux of the debate at the State Board of Education and inside Legislative Hall.

In the end, however, we fell two votes short of achieving historic reform.

This time, however, parents and other stakeholders didn't go home quietly. They began organizing their interest and lobbying efforts, with one result being an [American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit](#) against the state of Delaware on behalf of the Delaware NAACP and Delawareans for Education Opportunity. Filing such a case indicates a shift in the public mood: Parents are telling us that debate needs to be replaced by action.

Such lawsuits have the potential to become a catalyst for action. The fundamental debate about equal access to public education in Delaware is bookended between the original 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1980 federal desegregation order covering Wilmington and New Castle County; between lie a number of significant lower court decisions occurring during the intervening 26 years.

The General Assembly has also begun to act. Last year our legislators guaranteed funding for special needs students in Delaware elementary schools. In the 29 years since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, the federal government has never met its funding obligations, while nonetheless insisting that all IDEA mandates be followed.

Delaware has now stepped into that gap on behalf of our youngest, most vulnerable students.

This past Tuesday, Gov. John Carney took a significant step forward by proposing a three-year, \$60 million effort to phase in weighted student funding. If approved by the Legislature, his plan would send \$500 for each English Language Learner and \$300 for each low-income student directly to school districts and charter schools.

Gov. Carney's proposal is a watershed moment. The commission estimated in 2016 that adequate financial support to low-income students and English Language Learners would require \$50 million per year.

The potential impact of this initiative is huge. Based on current student population, for example, the Red Clay Consolidated School District, our largest and most diverse district, would receive an additional \$2.9 million next year to focus on these student populations. Capital School District would be in line for \$1.2 million and Cape Henlopen for over \$700,000.

In the General Assembly, this is not a partisan debate. Thoughtful members on both sides of the aisle are stepping into an increasingly action-oriented posture about the future of Delaware education.

I feel that imperative personally. Having been privileged to chair the commission and its predecessor group, the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee, since September 2014, I have not only been actively involved in these debates but have found my passion and my professional life's work. In August 2017, I left the corporate world to become provost of Delaware State University.

Accepting this post ties directly into K-12 public education. Delaware State University has a 128-year history of not only embracing those who have been traditionally locked out or underserved by our education system but empowering them to achieve their dreams.

Positioning this university to be an even more consequential participant in improving Delaware's K-12 education system while simultaneously expanding our offerings and capacities is a full-time job.

It's time for me to move from leading a conversation to directly implementing change. Others from the commission, like Sen. Elizabeth "Tizzy" Lockman, D-Wilmington, and Rep. Nnmandi Chukwuocha, D-Wilmington North, who have both won election to the General Assembly, are also moving into areas where their voice and vote will speak louder than ever before.

That includes their work with the Wilmington Education Strategies Think Tank, of which Lockman and Chukwuocha are charter members. WESTT is collaborating with the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League to launch the Wilmington's first Center for Education Equity & Public Policy.

We should all be able to see far more clearly now, as Michelle Obama would remind us, what needs to be done, and it's time to do the work. Here's the agenda for action over the next few years:

First and foremost, our Legislature needs to build Gov. Carney's initiative into a long-term weighted-funding mechanism to benefit all high-need students in Delaware. Critical challenges face schools in communities statewide

(Newark, Dover, Seaford), and the impact of poverty in parts of Sussex and Kent Counties constitutes just as high a barrier to the education of poor kids there as it does in Wilmington.

We are charged with solving for ALL of our children.

There is nothing inevitable about our victory over the blight that child poverty visits on education, growth, and lifetime opportunity, but there is never a justification to quit the struggle, even though we should all retain the flexibility to change our roles and our approaches from time to time.

Writing in the shadow of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I am reminded of the necessity to not give in to despair, politics as usual, or fatigue when the challenge affects our children. King once wrote, "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle."

And so we struggle on – for our children, for ourselves and for each other.