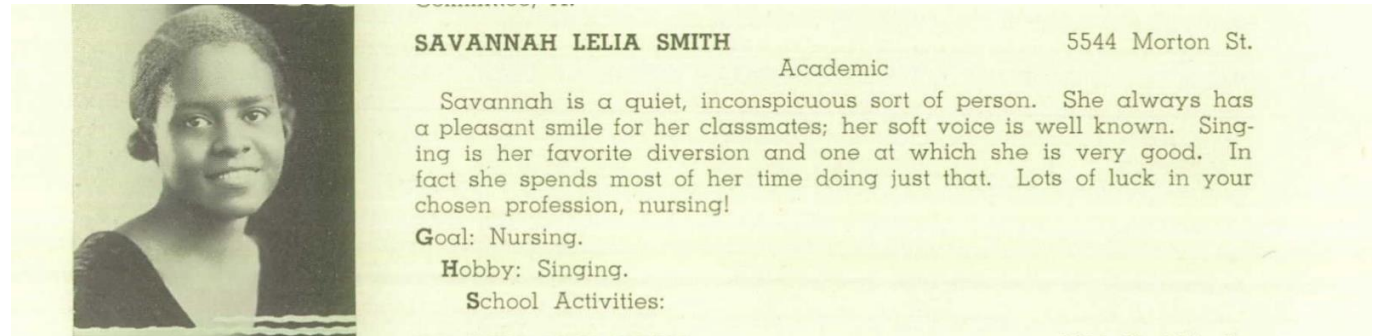




Notice & Wonder

Savannah Lelia Smith and Marion Campbell



“*The Roots of Educational Inequality: Savannah Smith Holman, Germantown High School, Class of 1936, Yearbook,*” n.d.

“Less than 5% of Germantown High school’s 1930 graduates were Black. Like their predecessors, most were the sons and daughters of southern migrants who moved north to provide their families with a better future. And like the Black graduates in the 1920 cohort, most (64%) enrolled in the academic program. A few years later, in 1936, Marion Campbell, whose father worked as a laborer in the local steel mills and whose mother stayed at home to raise her children, was one of a handful of Black youth who graduated from Germantown High School. When Marion registered for high school, she spoke with a school counselor, who never looked at her academic record, to finalize their course selection. The counselor urged Marion to enroll in the commercial course. Marion disregarded this advice and demanded to be placed in the academic program.

As a Black student in the academic program, Marion experience racism throughout her schooling experience. She recalled that her teachers seated students alphabetically, with all the white students in the front of the classroom and all the Black students in the back. A few weeks before graduation, Marion's calculus teacher gave her an F minus for the course. When Marion complained about this to her peers, she learned that the teacher had given this grade to all the Black students in her class. The students knew that this teacher was racist but could not publicly challenge the teacher’s assessments. Marion and her peers registered for another calculus class and graduated the following semester with their academic diplomas.”

Kitzmilller, Erika M. 2022. *The Roots of Educational Inequality: Philadelphia’s Germantown High School, 1907-2014*. 1st edition. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp 68-69.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

OPINION > COMMENTARY

Racial disparities in school funding are not about bad policy. They're rooted in the differential valuing of children's lives.

Republican lawmakers are up to their “tricks of the trade” again, finding ways to maintain the racial school funding status quo.

A Pennsylvania judge ruled in 2023 that the state's school funding system is unconstitutional.
<https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/school-funding-pennsylvania-race-budget-20240126.html> 1/23

by Roseann Liu, For The Inquirer
Published Jan. 26, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

Recently, the 2023 Basic Education Funding Commission published its report and made recommendations for changing Pennsylvania's school finance system. As someone who follows issues of Pennsylvania school funding, the obstructionist and delay tactics of Republican lawmakers are giving me an ominous sense of *déjà vu*.

As a professor at Swarthmore College, I often tell my students that we study the history of education policies and the actions of policymakers so we're not doomed to repeat the same inequitable decisions of the past. Understanding this history helps us respond in the current moment.

Racial disparities in Pennsylvania school funding first came to light during the [2014 Basic Education Funding Commission hearings](#). David Mosenkis, a data scientist and member of [POWER Interfaith](#), a racial justice organizing group, testified to his finding that whiter school districts received more state funding than majority-minority districts, when controlling for poverty and other factors. The finding that Pennsylvania distributes school funding in ways that privilege whiter school districts has been confirmed by [other studies](#).

After Mosenkis' testimony, Republican State Sen. Pat Browne, cochair of the first Basic Education Funding Commission in 2014, responded the way a politician in a public setting would be expected to: surprise and a promise to do better. Browne stated that he didn't want funding formulas "to have any unintended consequences, because at a minimum level, it sends a bad public policy message." He added that "there's no reason in regards to what we do in the future that should continue to allow that."

And yet, shortly after the first commission issued its report, Pennsylvania's Republican-led General Assembly enacted a law that preserved racial inequities in school funding. Although the [2016 law](#), based on the commission's recommendations, adopted a "fair" funding formula, the fine print dictated that the formula would only be applied to new money (i.e., increases to the state education budget). In 2017–2018, this meant that only 8% of the total education budget was [distributed "fairly"](#) — that is, in a racially equitable manner.

Tactics to evade the implementation of racially equitable school funding policies are part of Harrisburg culture and are common enough outside of Pennsylvania that education scholars refer to these as the "[tricks of the trade](#)" of state legislators.

Another "trick of the trade" included the use of not-nearly-enough "earmarked funding" to specific underfunded districts. The practice, according to state legislators, has been around for decades but only [drew scrutiny in 2013](#). Earmarked funding was a poorly constructed stopgap

effort that diverted attention away from the systemic problem of educational underfunding. It pacified constituents by giving the appearance that legislators were fighting for school funding when, in reality, it was a sloppily adhered Band-Aid. Browne was able to secure multiple years of earmarked funding for his underfunded school district in Allentown. So much state legislative activity produced so little change.

To be sure, the [recent Basic Education Funding Commission report](#) has more to recommend than its previous counterpart. For one, it acknowledges that there is a significant gap between what Pennsylvania currently provides and what is needed for an adequate education. And it attached a figure — \$5.4 billion — to plug the adequacy gap, though this is still less than the [\\$6.2 billion](#) calculated by Matthew Kelly, a Pennsylvania State University professor.

But today's Republican lawmakers are up to their "tricks of the trade" again, finding ways to maintain the racial school funding status quo, despite the Commonwealth Court's 2023 ruling that Pennsylvania's school funding system is [unconstitutional and in need of reform](#).

In a move to delay and undermine racial equity in Pennsylvania school funding, Republican commission members voted against the final report, issuing their own [bootleg version](#). The Republican report rehashes the same tired narrative of the "potential consequences of a formula that does not allocate to each district at least the same level of proportion of state basic education funding as the district received in the prior school year."

In other words, Republican commission members are calling to preserve the policy of "hold harmless" that maintains the school funding privileges of predominantly white districts.

Racial inequity in school funding is not, primarily, a problem rooted in poor policymaking; it is a problem rooted in the differential valuing of children's lives.

Those who reject the premise that certain children are worthy of greater educational investment because of the color of their skin should also reject the delay tactics of Republican lawmakers. We should communicate our urgency to Gov. Josh Shapiro and our state legislators as they decide whether to continue to delay justice or to act now to transform Pennsylvania's racially inequitable school funding system.

Roseann Liu is the author of "[Designed to Fail: Why Racial Equity in School Funding Is So Hard to Achieve](#)." She is a visiting assistant professor of Asian American studies and educational studies at Swarthmore College and an assistant professor of education studies at Wesleyan University.

RL

Roseann Liu, For The Inquirer



Resource Exploration

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<p>What evidence in this article was new or surprising to you? What was familiar? What do you want to understand more fully?</p>	<p>How does the information shared in this article make you feel?</p>
<p>How does this article change or inform your understanding of the way that school funding decisions are made in PA?</p>	<p>In reflecting on this article, what new questions have emerged for you?</p>



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