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Bipartisan group of Pa. lawmakers to find alternatives to school property taxes

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The former Wilkinsburg High School. (Sarah Schneider/WESA)

Pennsylvania lawmakers will meet soon to try to find alternatives to school property taxes. The task force is far from the first effort to replace the funding mechanism.

Attempts to kill property taxes have stalled for years as legislators have searched for the right mix of taxes to replace the \$13 billion in property taxes that pay for public education. There are a number of bills in the legislature that would either cut property taxes entirely or shift more of the burden to other taxes like personal income.

Allegheny County Democratic representative Austin Davis was recently appointed to the task force.

He serves school districts including McKeesport, Clariton and Steel Valley.

"They have an older, shrinking tax base. Their homes are not valued at the same amounts as places in, like, the North Hills. So that absolutely adds to an equity issue," he said.

Davis acknowledges that lawmakers have tried to find a more equitable solution for decades.

Pennsylvania puts a heavier burden on local taxpayers to fund public education than most states. According to the 2016 Census, the state covers about 38 percent, the rest comes from local districts through property taxes. That creates a disparity between wealthier and poorer districts.

Davis also worries about senior citizens who he says can't afford the tax increases that school districts say they need.

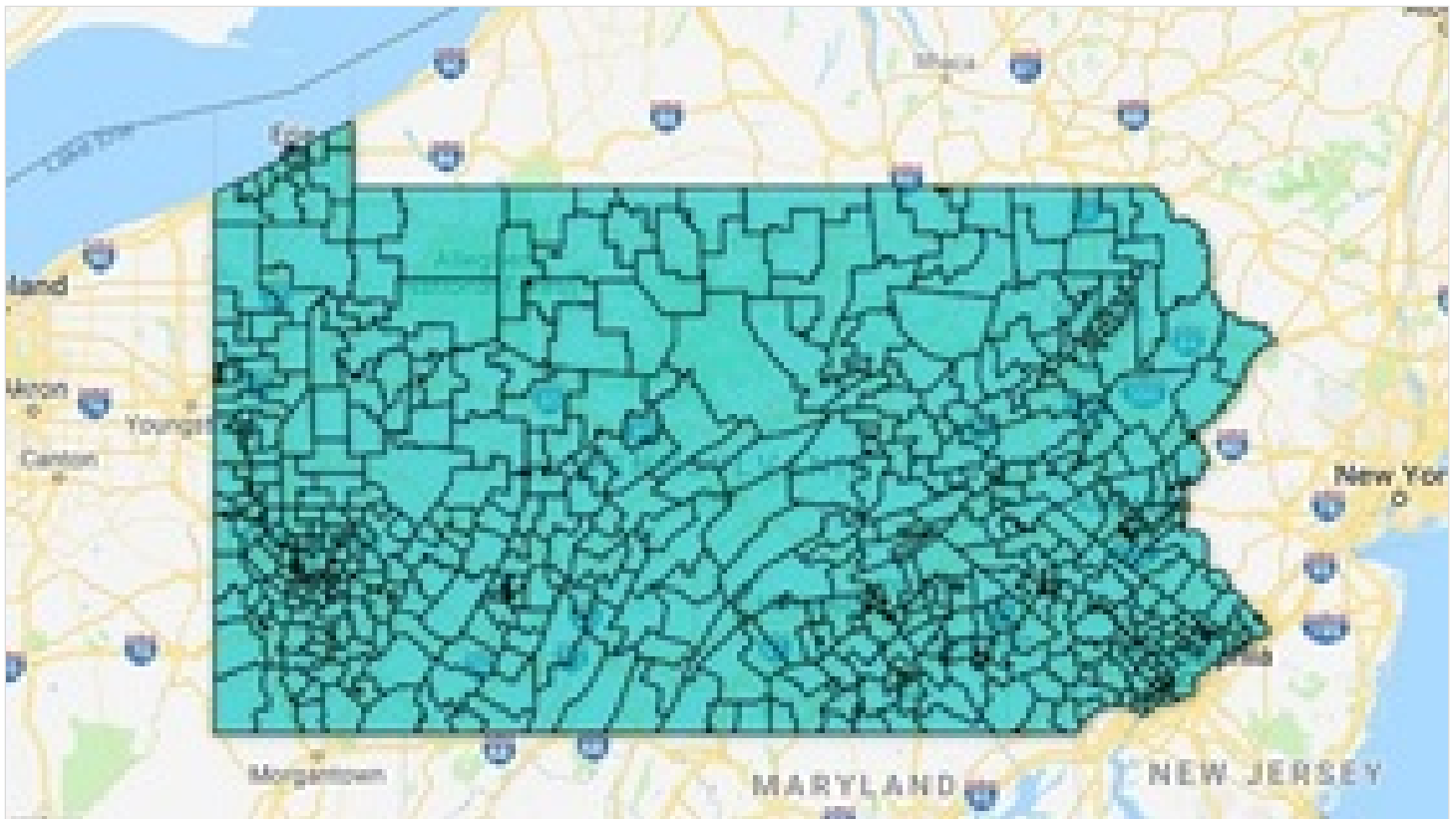
"When an area experiences a growth in population of school-aged children, that leads to more school spending and higher taxes. Our senior citizens, who for years worked tirelessly and now live on a fixed income, struggle to pay the increased school property tax," Davis said in a release. "This should be the least of their worries, and a solution should be put in place so that our most vulnerable citizens aren't living paycheck to paycheck."

In 2012 the *Washington Post* found that Pennsylvania had the largest disparity in per-pupil spending between wealthy and poor districts.

The state is currently being sued for inequitable funding. That lawsuit is scheduled for trial in summer 2020.

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