# Philadelphia school district proposes $4.6 billion budget to avoid cuts and prioritises repatriation of Native American remains



The Philadelphia School District has proposed a $4.6 billion budget for the 2025-26 school year, which includes plans to utilise $300 million from reserves to avoid layoffs and programme cuts. This approach was outlined as officials seek to maintain current service levels amid growing financial challenges.

On Thursday evening, at a public meeting, community members voiced their concerns and perspectives regarding the proposed budget. Superintendent Tony B. Watlington Sr. expressed his intention to draw on the district’s fund balance to ensure the district can meet its immediate financial obligations, while simultaneously advocating for increased funding from city and state sources in the future.

Parents and other attendees had mixed reactions. Some expressed gratitude for the district’s efforts to stave off cuts and layoffs for the time being. However, several participants conveyed that even the proposed budget is insufficient to meet fundamental needs. Two students from the Academy at Palumbo, a magnet high school in South Philadelphia, described ongoing issues at their school, such as consistently broken bathrooms and a longstanding rodent infestation. One student, My Le, who has mobility challenges, recounted difficulties caused by non-functioning elevators that forced her to climb to her classroom on the fifth floor, resulting in a reluctance to attend school.

Palumbo currently employs three school counsellors who serve approximately 1,200 students, tackling multiple responsibilities. My Le emphasised to the school board the scarcity of support, noting, "That is not nearly enough support, and this isn’t just an issue at Palumbo. I implore you to please fight for us. Fight for schools that motivate us to wake up in the morning."

Superintendent Watlington and the school board are expected to present the budget to the City Council on Tuesday, with a formal adoption scheduled for 29 May.

In addition to funding and support concerns, there was a strong call from parents, students, and community members for the revitalisation and prioritisation of school libraries. Philadelphia’s school district is reported to have one of the worst library-to-school ratios among major US cities. Presently, only three schools—Central, Masterman, and Penn Alexander—have full-time librarians. South Philadelphia High and Shawmont Elementary maintain part-time library staff.

Recently, federal funding that supported efforts to rebuild school libraries was discontinued, and district officials have yet to clarify the future of this work. Sirus Nannery, a student at Shawmont Elementary, which reinstated its library this year after a budget threat nearly led to its closure, spoke about the library’s importance. "I feel that Shawmont’s library and other schools’ libraries are very important for education," he said. "We do need them to give students the knowledge they need to pursue a successful career."

Separately, the Philadelphia School District has unanimously agreed to repatriate Native American human remains found at Central High School. The remains were first discovered in 2021 when a skull, reportedly used for anatomy instruction, was uncovered. Investigations revealed no other human remains in the district’s schools.

Local anthropologists helped identify the remains as those of a Native American man. Under the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, institutions that benefit from federal funding must return Native American remains to their lineal descendants or culturally affiliated tribes.

Despite efforts, the district was unable to trace a direct tribal affiliation. However, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes have agreed to accept and bury the remains, a decision supported by Superintendent Watlington. The board’s unanimous vote to proceed with repatriation reflects compliance with federal law and respect for cultural heritage.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.inquirer.com/education/live/philly-school-board-budget-tony-watlington-20250327.html> - This article details the Philadelphia school board's meeting where Superintendent Tony Watlington discussed the $4.6 billion budget for the 2025-26 school year. It covers the plans to utilize reserves to avoid cuts and layoffs.
2. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/philadelphia/2025/03/27/school-board-adopts-preliminary-budget-warns-of-deficit-trump-uncertainty/> - Chalkbeat reports on the Philadelphia school board passing a preliminary $4.6 billion budget, highlighting concerns about deficits and financial uncertainties.
3. <https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-school-district-deficit-budget/> - WHYY discusses the Philadelphia School District's budget deficit and the plan to use 40% of its reserves, mentioning concerns about future financial sustainability and potential spending decisions in 2027.
4. <https://www.philasd.org/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/96/2024/02/2024-25-Guide-to-School-Budgets_Final.pdf> - This guide provides context on the budget process and financial challenges faced by the School District of Philadelphia, though it specifically addresses the 2024-25 fiscal year.
5. <https://www.pa.gov/governor/governor-shapiro-s-budget/budget-details.html> - The Pennsylvania state budget details include an increase in basic education funding, which could influence local district budgets like Philadelphia's, though it does not specifically address the Philadelphia School District's budget challenges.
6. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/1995/06/21/95-15341/native-american-graves-protection-and-repatriation-act-regulations-final-rule> - This document explains the federal regulations regarding the repatriation of Native American remains, which supports the context behind the Philadelphia School District's decision to repatriate Native American remains found at Central High School.
7. <https://www.inquirer.com/education/philadelphia-school-board-native-american-remains-budget-libraries-20250425.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data