

# An Occupational Justice Approach to Addressing Inequities in the School District of Philadelphia: Outcomes of an Advocacy-based Interdisciplinary Intervention

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## Background

**Problem Statement:** In the School District of Philadelphia, environmental toxins, crowded conditions, lack of resources, and understaffing threaten the safety and wellbeing of staff and students. These conditions are direct consequences of long-term underfunding. The environment impacts individuals' ability to participate in their essential occupations of education and work.

**Project AIM:** By the Summer of 2022, our interdisciplinary, advocacy-based group will take direct steps to improve awareness of chronic underfunding in the School District of Philadelphia and increase stakeholder engagement. These steps will be evidenced by 1) Increased connections and joint projects with partner organizations, 2) Expanded publications through varied forms of media, 3) Direct communication with an increased number of stakeholders.

## Interventions

### Community Outreach

By partnering with other healthcare professions and community organizations, occupational therapists can provide their perspective to advocate for policy change and increased stakeholder involvement.

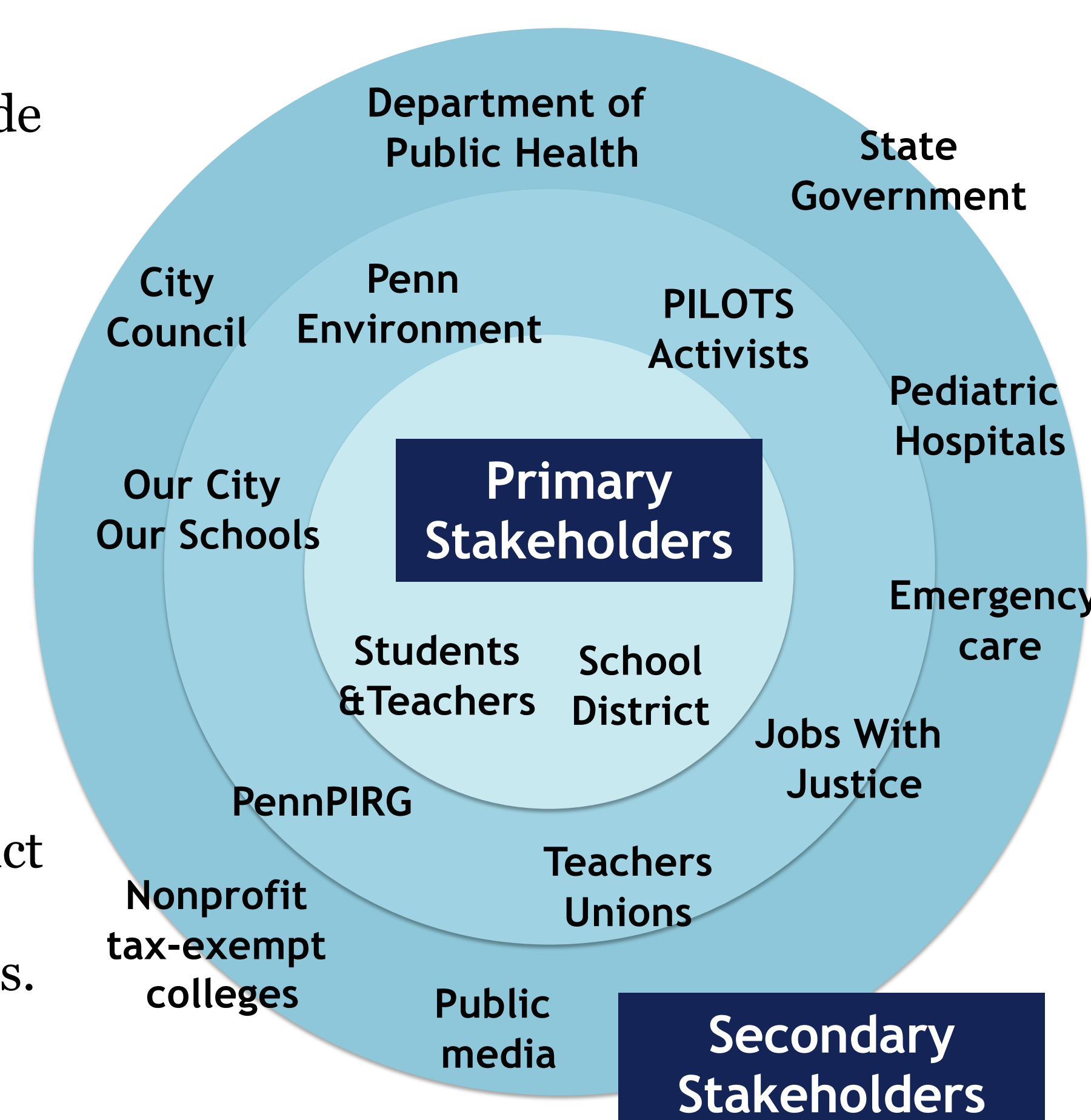
### Advocacy

Our group is committed to exploring alternative funding models, including advocating for policies that support wealth redistribution. We provide testimony at city budget hearings, write op-eds, and conduct research to support removing environmental toxins from schools.

### Education & Awareness

We help the public understand the link between school inequities and social determinants of health (SDOH) by providing lectures and events. Additionally, we work to push for integration of school conditions in pediatric SDOH screenings.

### Stakeholders in Addressing School Inequity



## INEQUITY IN SCHOOL FUNDING AND OCCUPATIONAL JUSTICE

Occupational justice is "the right of every individual to be able to meet basic needs and to have equal opportunities and life chances to reach toward her or his potential but specific to the individual's engagement in diverse and meaningful occupation." (Wilcock & Townsend, 2009, p. 193)

This infographic gives a visual explanation of how inequities in school funding translate into health disparities



## Conclusions & Implications

The occupational therapy practice framework includes examples of interventions at the individual, group, and population level (AOTA, 2020). Therefore, OTs are equipped to provide interventions aimed at promoting the health and wellness of communities.

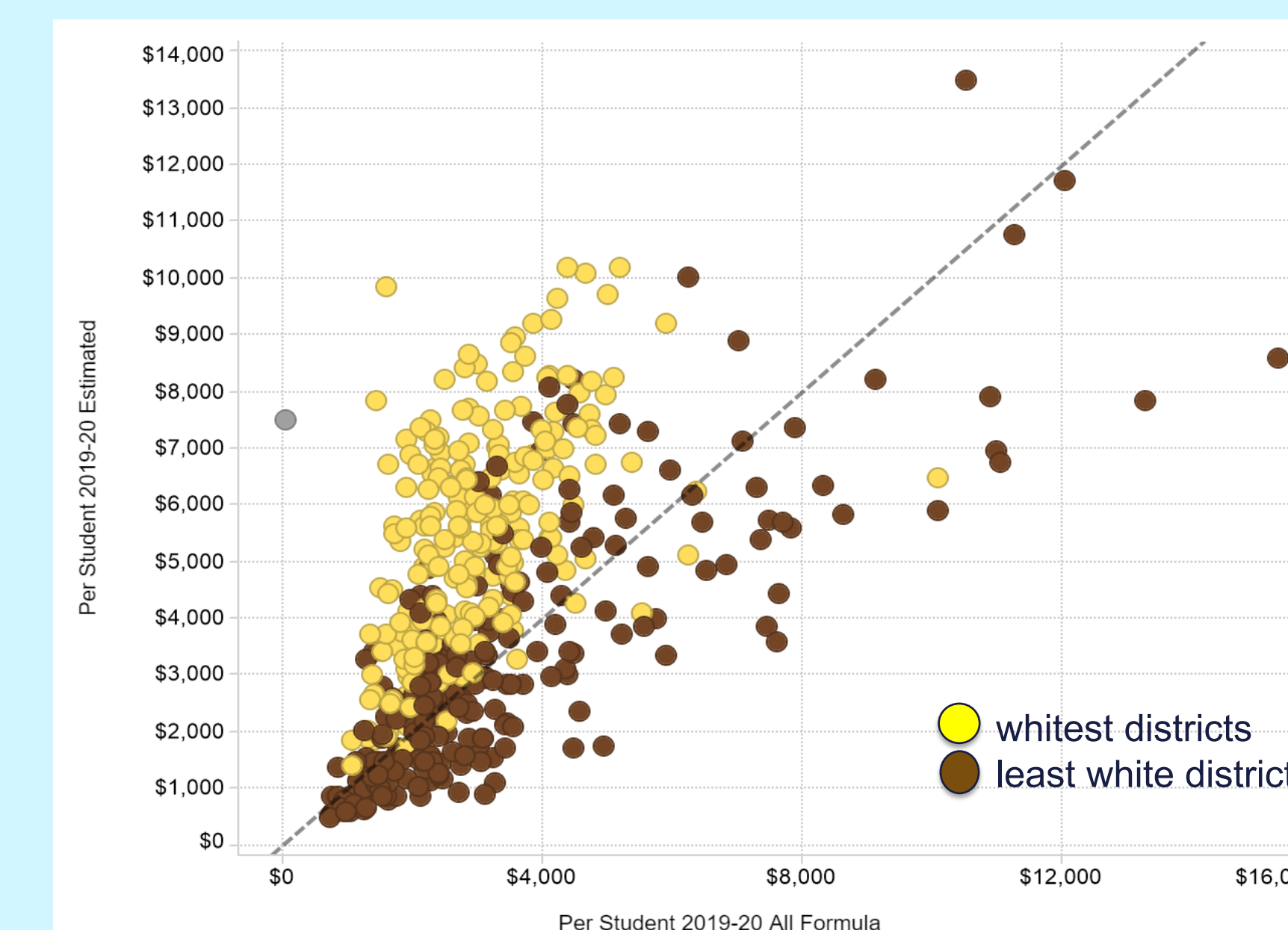
Through community outreach, advocacy, and education, occupational therapists can work in conjunction with other healthcare professionals and community members to address barriers to daily role participation.

Occupational Justice can be implemented in the Philadelphia education system by modifying the physical environment in which Philadelphia students and staff members perform their essential occupations of work and school.

## Linkage to Healthcare Disparities

Pennsylvania's Fair Funding Formula directs state education funding using local socioeconomic factors to reduce wealth-based inequities in tax revenue for schools; however, only 11% of current state funding is distributed with the fair formula. This underfunding delays much needed repairs of Philadelphia's school buildings, which are on average 70 years old (Mezzacappa, 2022). The lead, mold, and asbestos in these aging school buildings contributes to poorer health outcomes, including asthma rates in children that are more than double the national average, a teacher diagnosed with mesothelioma, and students cognitively affected by lead poisoning from paint chips (CEET,2020).

### The Racial Divide of Fair Funding



(Department of Education, n.d.)



Scan the QR code for a breakdown of toxins in Philly's schools.