

Continuing on the Road Toward an Improved School Finance System in Pennsylvania

THE CASE FOR A JOINT COMMISSION ON PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE

In November 2007, a study was released that provides a window into understanding what level of funding is realistically required for Pennsylvania public schools to prepare students for success in college or career.

The study, formally entitled “Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania’s Public Education Goals,” was commissioned and funded in 2006 by the General Assembly, supervised by the State Board of Education, and performed by Denver-based consultants, Augenblick, Palaich & Associates (APA).

In general, the study concludes that the state’s contribution of public education funding is insufficient to ensuring the goal that 100 percent of students achieve proficiency in meeting the state’s academic standards. The study does not make a recommendation for a new funding formula, but notes that the solution must be the work of the governor and General Assembly.

The experience of other states suggests that a public school finance commission can serve a vital role in raising public awareness, crafting reasonable reforms and developing legislative consensus. Many stakeholders in Pennsylvania are optimistic that a commission in our Commonwealth could similarly develop the broad-based support needed for comprehensive and lasting reform.

The commission could have representation by key stakeholder groups; be chaired by an individual with vision, leadership, and commitment; and have the authority to:

- review findings and recommendations from the statewide costing-out study conducted by the State Board of Education;
- review systems and national trends in education funding;
- study the positive and negative aspects of school consolidation as a means to affect cost efficiencies;
- examine the efficacy of consolidating existing funding programs used to disperse state education funds;
- analyze the advantages and disadvantages of targeted categorical funding currently being used;
- conduct investigations and hold public hearings to receive public comment and testimony on proposals associated with the components of a sound school finance system;
- examine issues of efficiency (including consideration of recent reports on school district consolidation and school cost reductions);

- examine issues of accountability (including accountability for “inputs” and accountability for “outputs”), including the review of methods and systems that assist in determining student achievement such as a Value-Added Assessment System; and
- examine the impact federal mandates and state regulations and guidelines have on school districts.

Commission Recommendations

Commission recommendations should aim to create recommendations for a new education funding system that meets the basic principles of equity, adequacy, efficiency, accountability, and predictability.

In addition to issuing its recommendations to the General Assembly, the commission could be charged with monitoring the reform and reporting back to the public on progress made toward implementation of the new funding system.

Current Legislation

To ensure that the General Assembly’s investment in this costing-out study becomes a catalyst for solutions, legislators are proposing to create a Joint Legislative Commission on Public School Finance that would be charged with crafting recommendations for a new, equitable school funding formula. The commission would deliver an interim report to the General Assembly six months from the date of the first meeting, and a final report within one year from the date of the first meeting.

- In the House, Reps. John Siptroth (D- Monroe/Pike) and Beverly Mackereth (R-York) introduced HR 460 in October 2007. The resolution has a total of fifty (50) sponsors. On December 12, the House Education Committee, under the leadership of chairs James Roebuck (D-Phila) and Jess Stairs (R – Fayette/Westmoreland), voted unanimously to move HR 460 out of committee and into the full House for consideration in January.
- In the Senate, Sen. Pat Browne (R – Lehigh) introduced a companion proposal, SR 210 in November 2007. The resolution has a total of fifteen (15) sponsors.
- The 41-member commission would be composed of members of the General Assembly, education experts, business leaders, parents and teachers.

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