

What is Wrong With Pennsylvania's Current Funding System for Public Education?

Introduction: Since 1991, Pennsylvania has not had a functional system for adequately funding public education. Instead, the state bases its annual education budget primarily on politics. Thus, communities must compete with each other for state funding to meet the needs of their students and schools. But, overall, financial support from the state has also steadily fallen since the 1970's, compared to the resources that local communities must raise for themselves. This has put great pressure on local property taxes, especially in low-wealth communities with many disadvantaged students. Pennsylvania needs a new education funding system that fairly distributes adequate resources in an efficient and predictable manner, with strong accountability for results.

Why does the current funding system need to be reformed or replaced?

- Hundreds of Pennsylvania school districts do not have enough funding to provide all students with a quality education. This is especially true for districts with high numbers of students in poverty, with disabilities, and learning English. Our state has established high expectations and challenging academic standards for all students. But many students and schools are not supported with the funding needed for them to meet these mandatory standards. Thousands and thousands of children attend schools with large class sizes, unsafe facilities, unqualified teachers, and outdated libraries and labs.
- Most states pay a larger percentage of overall public education costs than Pennsylvania. Our state ranks 44th in the nation on this measure. On average, other states contribute 47% of total education funding, but in 2006 Pennsylvania contributed only 36%. This low state share means that local school districts must pay 55% of all public education costs, compared to the national average of 44%. (National Center for Education Statistics).
- Pennsylvania's current school-funding system also does not distribute money to schools on an efficient or predictable basis. State education funding is distributed through nearly 60 programs or supplements, each with a different formula and eligibility standards. (Pennsylvania Department of Education). School districts usually do not know the level of funding they will receive from the state until *after* the legal deadline for adopting local school budgets. Therefore, schools are forced to budget by guessing the amount of state funding they will receive in a given year.
- The Governor and the General Assembly deserve credit for moving toward some reforms. For the last few years, the state has provided extra "foundation" funding for under-funded school districts. However, the annual amount of "foundation" funding is *less* than 10 percent of what is truly needed to create funding equity and adequacy. In addition, the state commissioned its first costing-out study in 2006 to calculate the funding needed by each school district to provide a quality education. Now the state must use this information to replace the current, ineffective funding system.

How are students affected by inadequate and unequal funding?

- Pennsylvania's current education funding system causes a student's zip code to be her destiny. Some school districts annually spend a total of \$17,000 per student while other districts only spend \$7,000. (Pennsylvania Department of Education). Such large resource inequities limit the educational opportunities for many children. This is wrong.
- Could your child's classroom use an additional \$50,000 in each year? When a school district spends even \$2,000 less per student than another district, a spending gap of \$50,000 is created for every classroom of 25 students. In 2006, 149 Pennsylvania school districts spent below \$9,000.00 per student while 98 districts spent more than \$11,000 per student. Thus, many thousands of children attend significantly under-funded schools in Pennsylvania. This affects their individual futures and the well-being of our entire state.
- Academic support services are very important to help struggling students. Poorly funded schools spend up to 72% less per student for support services than well funded schools in Pennsylvania. The average amount of money spent annually per student for support services ranges from \$2,000 to \$7,000 among different school districts.
- Inadequate resources make it difficult for many districts to provide the quality teachers, small class sizes, early childhood programs, up-to-date textbooks, technology, libraries, laboratories, and facilities needed to help all students to meet state academic standards. For example, average teacher salaries range from about \$36,000 in districts with the lowest salaries to over \$76,000 in other districts.

How do these issues impact all Pennsylvanians?

- Student achievement is affected by under-funding. Students do not have a fair chance to meet state academic standards when their education is supported by fewer resources and opportunities to learn.
- Under-funding by the state puts great pressure on local taxes. Real property tax reform is needed, but will require fixing the state's broken system for funding public education. Act 72 and Act 1 have done nothing to address these issues, but only substitute one kind of tax for another on a dollar-for-dollar basis.
- Quality public schools are important to all communities. Education affects the economy, crime, health care, and other areas of community well being. Currently, Pennsylvania's economy is growing at only half the rate of the national average. Also, out of all states in 2001, Pennsylvania spent the 7th highest amount on funding for prisoners and prisons.

Conclusion: Pennsylvania's current school funding system is BROKEN, UNFAIR, and UNBALANCED. Pennsylvania needs to put in place a new system of school funding with a larger funding contribution from the state. Increased state funding for schools will promote local tax reform and will allow for fiscal accountability, predictability, and equity. Most importantly, increased state funding will ensure that schools can provide for the educational needs of all students, and that all students will therefore have equal opportunities to achieve.