



AP: Study says PA underfunding education by about \$5 billion.

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP, Nov. 14) - Getting all Pennsylvania students to meet the state's academic expectations would cost roughly \$22 billion a year, or about \$5 billion more than what is being spent now, according to a study commissioned by the State Board of Education.

On a per-pupil basis, most school districts' spending falls short of the ideal level, the study found.

The "costing-out" study is intended to give policymakers a starting point for rethinking how to finance public education, but it does not prescribe exactly how they should fill in the gap, said John Augenblick, whose Denver consulting firm was hired to complete the study.

"There is no right answer to that question," Augenblick said.

Similar studies aimed at attaching a price tag to student achievement have been conducted in nearly 40 other states since 1991, some of them commissioned by education advocacy groups and others ordered by courts to resolve school-funding lawsuits.

Pennsylvania is among several states more recently compelled to analyze education spending at the behest of state lawmakers, Augenblick said. The Legislature set aside \$650,000 in the 2006-07 state budget for the Pennsylvania study.

The state board has no authority over school funding but can work with people who have an interest in the issue to encourage lawmakers to act, said James Barker, a board member who led a committee overseeing the study.

"The black box was, 'What's the cost ... to adequately educate a student to Pennsylvania standards?'" said Barker, who is also superintendent of Erie's public schools. "Knowing that, we have a responsibility to communicate that message, to try to ensure that regardless of income, a student has an opportunity to become what he or she can become."

Such studies have become more common as states have struggled with improving student achievement under the federal No Child Left Behind law, which calls for all students to be proficient in math and reading by 2014.

"That begs the question of, 'How much does it cost to accomplish to do what the state is trying to do?'" Augenblick said.

Augenblick's firm calculated the cost in Pennsylvania by analyzing all sources of education spending - state, local and federal money - during the 2005-06 fiscal year, focusing on expenses related to operating and maintaining schools. The analysis did not include spending on items such as transportation, construction and food service, Augenblick said.

About two-thirds of the total cost derived from the study relates to educating an average student. It also includes a range of other costs, including serving students who need special education, speak English as a second language or live in high-poverty households.

The analysis also examined the spending of the most academically successful school districts, sought educators' opinions on what schools need to meet certain academic performance targets, and reviewed research on effective educational practices.

The study found that most of the state's 501 school districts spend less money per pupil than called for by the analysis. The largest gap was in the Reading School District, where actual per-pupil spending fell below the study's "costing-out" estimate by nearly \$6,500, or 87 percent.

Twenty-seven school districts spend more per pupil, according to the study. They include affluent suburban districts such as Lower Merion near Philadelphia, the financially and academically troubled Duquesne City School District near Pittsburgh, and small, rural systems such as the Forest Area School District in northwestern Pennsylvania.

Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak said the study validated recent efforts by Gov. Ed Rendell's administration to boost state education spending.

"The General Assembly's study should serve as a wake-up call that, despite all we have done to increase our vital investments in public education, we must accelerate the rate of progress for the sake of our students," Zahorchak said in a statement.

Policymakers' reactions to such studies have varied, Augenblick said.

Some states have taken no action while others have revised their school-funding formulas. Some states increased state education spending. In Maryland, for example, state lawmakers raised the cigarette tax in 2002 to help boost school funding by \$1.3 billion over six years.

The board is expected to formally accept the study on Thursday and forward it to the House and Senate education committees for consideration.

Lawmakers in both chambers have proposed creating a commission to examine the findings and recommend changes to the school-funding formula within a year of the

panel's first meeting. Its membership would include lawmakers, school board members, teachers, parents and education experts.

Sen. Patrick Browne, R-Lehigh, said he is hoping to advance his version of the legislation in the Senate before the Christmas holiday.

"That is something the Legislature will take very seriously," Browne said.

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