

Report on costs of successful schools opens door to equity and efficiency

November 16, 2007

The Pennsylvania Board of Education and the Legislature released a landmark document on Wednesday. For the first time, the state has numbers with which to answer the question: Do schools and districts have the resources they need to meet state performance expectations? The short answer is "no," and the next question is what are we going to do about it? The answer is in the hands of the Legislature.

When it comes to the public schools -- where 90 percent of Pennsylvanians are educated -- the state has made progress by setting standards, creating ways to assess how the schools are doing and holding educators responsible. In fact, the federal No Child Left Behind law sets a rather high standard for schools here and across the nation. By 2012, all students -- that's 100 percent -- must meet proficiency standards for math and reading.

However, no one knew what that would cost. Whether funds for the public schools are raised by property taxes, state subsidy or other sources, Pennsylvania was slogging toward a goal it did not know and had not quantified. Now it is. The study released this week says that the state needs to spend \$4.61 billion more than it currently does, an increase of 26.8 percent. Looked at on a per-pupil basis, the study said Pennsylvania should be spending \$12,057 per pupil. The current average per-pupil spending is \$9,512.

Related links

- [Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Public Education Goals \(PDF\)](#)

The report said, "On average, the poorest 20 percent of districts have to raise spending by 34.9 percent, while the wealthiest 20 percent only have to raise spending by 6.6 percent." And that leads to the issue of the glaring inequity that exists in funding for Pennsylvania schools. On the opposite end of the spectrum from those low-spending schools, the report found others spending 30 percent above the amount it identified as adequate.

Details matter, and to see where individual districts stand, go on-line to themorningcall.com to read the report. Scroll down to page 67 where charts showing numbers for every Pennsylvania district begin. In Lehigh and Northampton counties, you will see every district is below the recommended per-pupil funding. Some fall below by a lot. (Allentown is \$5,449 behind, Bethlehem is \$4,256 behind.) Some are down by relatively small amounts. (Salisbury is short by \$439 per pupil, Saucon Valley by \$385.) By contrast, Bryn Athyn, a tiny district in Montgomery County, spends \$5,443 more per pupil than the adequacy amount.

The report is by no means a call for increasing school taxes. Rather, it is a challenge to the Legislature to study these figures and develop an efficient and equitable way of funding public education, neither of which Pennsylvania now has. Next, the Legislature should adopt a proposal introduced by Reps. John Siptroth, D-Monroe County, and Beverly Mackereth, R-York, that would

seat a 41-person commission charged with using the costing-out report to revise the state's school-funding formula. Just as Gov. Rendell and the legislators are looking to reduce or even eliminate school property taxes, knowing the right amount of funds to enable successful schools is indispensable.