

There's a glimmer of hope for school funding

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When was the last time you heard a contractor say he could build as nice a house for \$100,000 as for \$200,000? Or the Army claim it could make do with rifles for only half its combat troops in Iraq?

Most people believe that in their own professions or businesses, money matters.

So it's with great disingenuousness that some champions of capitalism seem to think that in education, money shouldn't matter.

These are people who will tell you that, by God, their teacher of 50 years ago ruled a class of 45 kids with an iron hand and no one ever spoke out of turn and everyone was proficient in reading, writing and arithmetic without all the frills of schools today.

Maybe. But the truth is, 50 years ago the kids who couldn't or wouldn't learn that way dropped out and were mostly able to find decent-paying jobs in manufacturing or other industries. Those days are gone. In today's global economy, it would be pretty hard to argue that classes in computer technology and foreign languages, for example, are frills.

Yet thanks to the archaic way Pennsylvania funds public education, some districts can't afford enough up-to-date textbooks and need a shoehorn to fit exploding populations of students into buildings older than dirt. Basing school funding largely on local property taxes has ensured that poorer municipalities with stagnant tax bases are going to have overtaxed homeowners and underfunded schools.

Which is why the results of a very wonkish thing called a "costing out study" (stay awake here) are important.

The state-commissioned study, released earlier this month, was designed to find out how much, realistically, it should cost districts to educate their students to meet state academic standards.

In 2005-2006, districts spent an average of \$9,512 per student (not counting transportation, food and construction.) The report found that to bring students up to proficiency, districts should expect to spend an average of \$12,057 per student. Statewide, that difference means \$4.61 billion more. That's a heck of a lot of bake sales.

State Sen. Pat Browne, R-Lehigh, who sponsored the bill to commission the report, said that figure caused some sticker shock in the Legislature.

The next step is to create a panel to dissect the study and figure out how to change the education funding formula to raise the money fairly.

"We need to establish what a local district needs to contribute and the state needs to contribute to bring each district up to that level," Browne said.

The good news is, districts like Allentown and their property owners should benefit greatly if the state can get this done.

Browne said Allentown residents pay an "extraordinary" level of property taxes to fund schools that nevertheless remain underfunded.

(The study found the Allentown School District spent \$8,291 per student in 2005-2006 but should expect to spend \$13,741 per child to enable its children to meet state standards.)

Lawmakers have been wrangling for decades over how to fairly fund education. Supporting the creation of this panel on funding is a way to show that this time, they're serious.

What a waste if the report is quietly shelved by a General Assembly too weak-willed to face the risks of ticking off one constituency or another.