

## Local schools call cost study 'flawed'

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POSTED: November 25, 2007

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Local schools look to the government for balance after the recent release of a study commissioned by the State Board of Education.

The school-cost study suggested that 474 of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts should spend more per student to meet state academic standards. The study recommends that districts spend \$8,003 on an average student.

The dollar amount changes when differences between districts, such as the number of students living in poverty, those needing special education and the number of English language learners are factored into the equation, said Sandy Zelno, school reform associate with the Education Law Center.

Other adjustments, such as regional cost of living, also were considered, she said.

Paul J. Gallagher, superintendent of the Hollidaysburg Area School District, said the study shows that the current funding system is "flawed."

He said 55 percent of his district's budget is funded locally. The state and federal government funds the remainder. But he said other districts receiving more government funding also fall short of the recommendations.

"The funding system is flawed, but it affects us all differently," he said.

Bringing the state funding level to 50 percent would be a "step in the right direction," he said.

Bedford Area School District Superintendent Glenn Thompson said Act 1 limits what a district can do to meet the study's suggested amount.

"We can't get to that point under the current state guidelines," he said. "We could not raise taxes fast enough to raise that. The state has to contribute significantly more money."

David A. Ellis, Altoona Area school board president, said schools face a challenge with mandates "not accompanied by funding."

He said studies are a waste of time, money and effort and that the money should be "put toward solving the problems."

Pennsylvania's additional investment in pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade education for the 2007-08 school year is \$558 million, a 6.3 percent increase.

Funding for basic education and related programs will increase by \$398.9 million, or 7.4 percent, according to the state's Department of Education Web Site. The state's 2007-08 budget designates \$9.4 billion for pre-kindergarten through 12th grades, the Web site states.

Zelno said Gov. Ed Rendell has been good to education, but the districts still are not getting what they need.

"The state has to come through," Thompson said. "The state is the one that has the responsibility to create a thorough, efficient education system. If not, they have a responsibility to kick in more."

“When you have 95 percent [of the districts] in the state not spending, then you begin to wonder who is not paying enough. But it’s all tax money. Everybody needs to make good decisions so we don’t waste people’s money.”

Former Bedford Area School District superintendent Patrick Crawford was a professional judgment panel participant for the study and is the professional development director for the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators.

“Will more money mean better education?” Crawford asked. “The answer is maybe. It makes a difference if the things you spend money on make a difference.”

Crawford said opportunities for children across the state are inequitable.

“Continued success of our nation is directly related to the strength and quality of our public education system,” he said.

Joseph Macharola, Cambria Heights School District superintendent, said the study must be kept in perspective. He said studies are conducted to “generate concepts so planning and actions can take place.”

“I hope that it leads us to a better funding comfort level,” he said of the study. “Otherwise, what is the purpose of such studies?”

Six regional public meetings are scheduled to present the study’s findings.

The two closest meetings to Blair County are scheduled for 7 to 9 p.m. Dec. 5 in Clearfield County at the DuBois Area High School auditorium, 425 Orient Ave.; and Dec. 6 in Allegheny County at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit 3, Sullivan-McGuffey Rooms, 475 E. Waterfront Drive, Homestead.

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