

School funding gets closer look in study

By [The Sentinel](#), November 16, 2007

Last updated: Friday, November 16, 2007 9:30 AM EST

We often talk about proper funding levels for education, but too often it's in the context of whether people are paying too much in taxes to support their local school districts.

This week, the state Board of Education released a study that puts a price tag on what it costs to educate a student to the standards required under Pennsylvania's regulations and goals. The price is \$22 billion a year, more than \$12,000 a student.

That's a good bit short of the \$17 billion currently being spent at the federal, state and local levels. One school district, Reading's, falls short of that ideal by \$6,500 annually.

They're not alone, though, since only 27 of the commonwealth's 501 school districts currently spend more per pupil than is recommended in the new study. But if you assume the districts outspending the study's recommendation are the most affluent ones, you're only partly right.

While such districts as Upper Merion in the wealthy Philadelphia suburbs are on that list, the small, rural Forest Area School District in northwest Pennsylvania and the troubled Duquesne School District in the Pittsburgh suburbs are also spending high per-pupil amounts.

So per-pupil spending isn't the whole story. Smaller districts don't get as big a bang for their dollar as larger ones, and schools serving predominantly poor and minority students must spend more to overcome the disadvantages those children have from the start.

Nevertheless, the shortfall between the ideal amount and what we actually spend is as good a starting point for discussion as any. Even without hard numbers, many states are aware that their education spending isn't keeping pace with stricter learning standards or rising costs.

In Pennsylvania, the debate for years has been over the state's failure to fully fund its historic commitment to provide 50 percent of all funding to school districts. The state has promised to rectify that inequity through the use of slot machine proceeds.

Finding still more money for education, however, shouldn't be the only result of this study. With only 27 school districts outspending the study's recommended yearly amounts — and with their results widely at odds — it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at the results from those school districts that are doing well with less. The money we don't spend is just as valuable as the money we do.