



Lawmakers to eye state's school funding formula

By RICHARD FELLINGER Harrisburg Bureau

A midstate Republican has teamed with a Pocono Democrat on a new strategy in the ongoing battle to draw more state money for growing schools.

Reps. Bev Mackereth, R-York, and John Siptroth, D-Monroe, unveiled a resolution calling for a special commission that would draft suggestions for new school funding formulas.

The 41-member commission would be charged with examining the data in a costing-out study on school expenses that is due Nov. 14 and making at least two recommendations to lawmakers within a year.

Studies on various issues are done regularly in Harrisburg, and Mackereth said the special commission is needed to ensure the one coming out next month is not "put on the shelf to collect dust."

While property taxes have soared recently in fast-growing districts--especially those near the Maryland and New York borders--many lawmakers from those areas have complained that the state's funding formula is outdated. It is a 1991 formula that gives every district a minimum increase each year without considering growth.

Yet those lawmakers have been unable to build a large enough political coalition to push through changes.

Mackereth said a special commission should help remove politics from the process and make a convincing case that changes are needed.

"Pennsylvania's funding formula is broken. It does not work and it must be fixed," she said.

The 41-member commission would include lawmakers, cabinet secretaries, school board members, teachers, parents and school administrators. It would have the power to hold public hearings and have to develop at least two proposals for funding formulas.

The Siptroth-Mackereth plan was hailed yesterday by school advocacy groups such as Good Schools Pennsylvania.

"The costing-out study lays the groundwork for what is needed to enact real, systemic change, but the study is just the first step. The appointment of a joint commission is one way to help guarantee that education finance reform efforts continue to gain momentum," said Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, in a news release.

House Education Committee Chairman James Roebuck, D-Philadelphia, said he'll consider the Siptroth-Mackereth plan. It is one of several plans he expects to see for translating the results of the costing-out study.

"The question is how we best do that," Roebuck said.

What's next

A statewide costing-out study on school expenses is due Nov. 14.