

State \$5 billion short for education needs

Study says state needs to spend \$22 billion a year to meet districts' learning targets

BY ERICA ERWIN
erica.erwin@timesnews.com [more details]

The cost of education			
Statewide, Pennsylvania districts spent an average of \$9,152 per student on education in 2005-06, but need to spend an average of \$12,061 per student to meet state academic standards, according to a new "costing out" study commissioned by the State Board of Education. Here's a look at the numbers for local districts:			
	Spending per pupil	Costing out estimate per pupil	Total difference per pupil
Erie County			
Corry area	\$8,804	\$11,639	-\$2,836 *
Erie	9,373	12,518	-3,144 *
Fairview	8,815	11,338	-2,523
Fort LeBoeuf	7,371	11,937	-4,566
General McLane	7,573	11,288	-3,715
Girard	7,419	11,444	-4,025
Harbor Creek	8,698	10,758	-2,060
Iroquois	8,266	11,277	-3,011
Millcreek Township	8,010	9,990	-1,980
North East	8,125	11,531	-3,406
Northwestern	6,805	11,423	-4,618
Union City Area	9,056	12,440	-3,384
Wattsburg Area	7,935	10,852	-2,917
Crawford County			
Conneaut	\$8,526	\$11,264	-\$2,737 *
Crawford Central	9,854	11,392	-1,538
Penncrest	8,682	11,044	-2,361 *
* Totals don't add up because of rounding.			

SOURCE: Pennsylvania State Board of Education

ERIE TIMES-NEWS

(Chris Sigmund/Erie Times-News)

The price of a quality education in Pennsylvania is about \$22 billion a year, or nearly \$5 billion beyond what districts already spend.

That's the finding of a study released Wednesday that is the first of its kind in the state to measure the cost of ensuring all students master state academic standards and reach proficiency in math and reading by 2014.

Locally, the 16 districts in Erie and Crawford counties collectively need to spend nearly \$153 million more to meet those targets, according to the "costing-out study" commissioned by the State Board of Education.

The Erie School District alone needs an additional \$42.7 million, or roughly \$3,144 more per student, the study found.

Erie schools Superintendent Jim Barker, a member of the State Board of Education, pushed for the study, said he was shocked by the gap.

"If nothing else, it should be a clear barometer of the challenges this district, these teachers and these

students face," Barker said.

Denver-based consulting firm Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc. used several methods to measure the "base cost" of educating an average student to meet state standards, not including transportation, construction, food service and other costs.

The Legislature set aside \$650,000 in the 2006-07 budget for the study. Among the findings:

- The vast majority of the state's school districts -- 474 out of 501 -- lack the necessary funds to ensure that all students are proficient in math and reading by 2014.
- Pennsylvania districts spent an average of \$9,152 on students in 2005-06, but need to spend an average of \$12,061 per student to meet standards.
- On average, the poorest 20 percent of districts have to raise spending by 34.9 percent to reach standards, while the wealthiest 20 percent only have to raise spending by 6.9 percent.
- The districts with the greatest needs generate the least amount of local revenues, while the districts with the lowest needs tend to generate the most. The poorest districts tend to have the highest tax efforts while the wealthiest districts have the lowest.

The funding gaps and the inequities between districts "aren't a revelation to anybody," General McLane schools Superintendent Alan Karns said.

"You've got schools in the eastern part of the state that spend \$12,000 to \$14,000 per student, and 20 miles away a school that spends \$6,000 per child" because of the current funding system, Karns said.

General McLane needs an additional \$8.9 million, or \$3,715 per student, to ensure all students meet state and federal standards, according to the study.

Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania called the study a landmark for Pennsylvania.

"After years of theories and guesses and estimates, we finally have a definitive answer to what it takes to provide a high-quality education to every student," Risch said.

Knowing that answer is more important than ever before as Pennsylvania students prepare to compete for jobs at home and overseas, she said.

"Years ago, ... you could drop out of high school and find a decent paying job in Pennsylvania, where you could purchase a house and hope to send your kids to college," Risch said. "Those opportunities have diminished, so the bar has been raised for American students."

The study does not offer suggestions how to fill the gap in funding or eliminate the inequities.

But Baruch Kintish, a staff attorney for the Philadelphia-based Education Law Center, said it's the responsibility of Gov. Ed Rendell and the Legislature to use the study results to fix a "broken, ineffective" school funding system.

"The work on the 2008-09 budget is beginning ... and certainly these results should be reflected in the budget for the next school year," Kintish said. "It's important that this study not sit on a shelf and gather dust."

A representative from Rendell's office did not return a call seeking comment.

@ To view the study, including results for local districts, log on to state Board of Education's Web site at www.pde.state.pa.us/stateboard_ed/.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

ERICA ERWIN can be reached at 870-1846 or by e-mail.