



## **State study eyes cost of putting children through public school system**

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A statewide study that will determine how much it will cost to put a child through the public school system will be released later this month. And, several state House members have introduced a bill that would create a commission tasked with analyzing study results and “ensuring” that basic education funding from the state is distributed equitably among school districts.

The Statewide Education Costing-Out Study, prepared at request of the State Board of Education, was undertaken in January with the goal of determining a base cost for preparing students to meet state academic standards.

The study will consider factors impacting school districts, such as size and location and the number of special education, poverty and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students, according to Good Schools Pennsylvania.

The report will be released at the State Board of Education’s Nov. 14 study session in Harrisburg.

The Good Schools organization teamed with Education Law Center and the Education Policy and Leadership Campaign when launching the Pennsylvania Education Funding Reform Campaign – an effort to engage the public and elected officials in work leading up to the costing-out study.

The organizations have supported the study, contending that Pennsylvania has been lacking a “sound funding forum.”

The study will examine a half-dozen issues affecting public education, including:

- o A review of school district tax efforts (local and state support).
- o The potential use of a geographic cost-of-education indexing program.
- o Investigating money that would meet the unique needs of schools (based on poverty, LEP populations, students with disabilities; population density; rural, urban and suburban issues as well as the number of gifted students).
- o Addressing the impact of student population trends and transportation costs.

With the study under way, more than three dozen state representatives – including Todd Eachus, D-116, Neal Goodman, D-123, and Keith McCall, D-122, – introduced Resolution 460.

The 10-page resolution recognizes arguments that dependence on local property taxes yields disparity in funding school districts and calls for establishing a 41-member Joint Legislative Commission on Public School Finance.

“Specific goals” of the commission include ensuring that basic education funding are distributed is distributed “adequately and equitably” among districts and that state funding allocations are “reflective of unique characteristics among districts.”

According to the resolution, the commission would consist of a recognized expert in public school finance, the chair and minority chair of the House and Senate education committees; a representative from the state Office of the Budget, and various members of the education community, including teachers, a school business manager, school administrators, an intermediate unit director, three school directors, parents and business community representatives.

The commission would have to develop at least two formulae for “adequate and equitable distribution” of state money for supporting public schools and must meet within 60 days from its formation, according to the resolution.

Commission members would not be paid for their services, but would be eligible for travel reimbursement and could recoup other “reasonable expenses incurred in connection with the performance of their duties,” the resolution says.

“If you look at Pennsylvania, it’s not a model – it’s not a place for saying one size fits all,” Eachus said of the system used for funding public schools.

“Places like western Pennsylvania, Uniontown, ... they are shrinking in population. There is no growth and they have an aging population. Look at our (area), we have the demographics and growth that were unexpected.

This costing-out study and this house resolution are what will allow for the flexibility of the funding to meet the local needs.”

Some districts spend about \$15,000 per pupil while others spend around \$5,000 under the existing funding system – which Eachus says will not result in the same quality of education for students.

Some factors that could impact that figure are largely related to the tax structure of each school district, including the debt load, construction and individual wealth within a community, he said.

Hazleton Area School District is mulling its second building program since it took on a project in 2003 to alleviate overcrowded classrooms.

While addressing overcrowding, the school board has been reviewing personnel needs identified in a staffing study while dealing with financial struggles that include a drained fund balance.

In 2005-06, Hazleton Area had the third lowest per-pupil expense reported among roughly three-dozen regional school districts, at \$7,984.

State funding accounts for about 44 percent of Hazleton Area's roughly \$99.2 general fund budget, according to reports released in June.