



Sunday, 18 November 2007

How much should we spend to educate a student in Pennsylvania?

A study commissioned by the state Department of Education tried to put a price tag on that question last week and it suggested that nearly every school district isn't spending enough.

The Hazleton Area School District had one of the biggest gaps. According to the study, Hazleton Area should be spending \$4,429 more per student every year in order to meet the state's expectations. Since there are more than 9,700 students in the district, that level of spending would bloat the school district budget by \$43.3 million per year.

What the study did not address was exactly where the extra money would come from.

School districts – especially those in poor areas – cannot generate the extra revenue locally. “The reality is there is no way we would be able to come up that type of funding with the current funding sources we have,” said Frank Victor, superintendent in Hazleton area.

If per-pupil funding is to increase, the state legislature will have to find a way to help school districts. The purpose of the “costing out” study was to get policymakers started on changing the way the state pays for public education.

As things stand now, Pennsylvania is doing a poor job of supporting public education. It ranked 45th among the 50 states in 2004-05, funding just 35.8 percent of all public-school education spending. Local and federal funds paid for the remainder.

It's obvious that changes are necessary. But we agree with Wilkes-Barre Area School District Superintendent Jeff Namey, who pointed out that spending more won't by itself help students learn. “Children in poorer districts should have the same opportunities, but throwing money will not necessarily resolve the issue,” he said.

The first priority should be to strive for more parity across the state. Per-pupil spending will never be identical in every district, but students in poor districts should have access to the same opportunities as those in richer areas.

Achieving parity is difficult when an upscale district like Lower Merion in suburban Philadelphia can spend \$17,184 per student while districts like Hazleton Area contribute almost \$10,000 less.