



Funding falling short

Study: Pa. must overhaul per-pupil spending

By BRIAN WALLACE, Staff
Intelligencer Journal

Published: Nov 15, 2007 2:15 AM EST

LANCASTER COUNTY, Pa - Funding for public school education in Lancaster County falls short by an average of \$3,335 per pupil, or \$236 million, according to a study released Wednesday by the state Board of Education.

The study determined it would take \$22 billion a year for all schools in the state to meet Pennsylvania's academic expectations — about \$4.6 billion more than what school districts are now spending.

Nearly 95 percent of the state's 501 school districts are spending less than what they should to adequately educate all students, the study found.

Advocates of school funding reform say the findings confirm that Pennsylvania's system, which relies heavily on local property taxes, is inadequate and inequitable and needs to be changed.

"Around the state, there's a growing awareness and appreciation for the fact that the inequities in our schools are not sustainable," Janis Risch, director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, said.

"I think the good news is that after years of guesses, we finally have an answer to what it (costs) to provide a good education in Pennsylvania."

The "costing-out" study was completed at the request of the state Legislature by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc., a consulting firm that has conducted similar studies for other states

The study is designed to provide a starting point for lawmakers as they consider whether changes should be made in the state's school funding mechanism.

Four methods were used to determine what it would cost for schools to master state standards in 12 academic areas and reach 100 percent student proficiency in reading and math.

The study also factored in the cost of supplemental educational services required for poor students, non-native English speakers and special-education students.

Expenditures for transportation, food service, school construction and debt service were not included in the calculations.

The study found the average annual cost of adequately educating a student in Pennsylvania is \$12,057, about \$2,500 more than what school districts spent, on average, in 2005-06.

In Lancaster County, the disparity is even greater.

The study determined it would cost an average of \$11,600 to adequately educate each pupil in the county. County school districts spent an average of just \$8,265 per pupil in 2005-06.

The funding disparities range from \$2,238 per pupil in Manheim Township School District to \$5,027 per pupil in School District of Lancaster.

School officials said they're not surprised by the findings.

"The study is more in line with the amount needed to adequately fund education," Stephen Iovino, SDL acting superintendent, said.

"I hope (state officials) use this information to take a hard look at how they're funding education across the state."

Conestoga Valley superintendent Gerald Huesken said the disparities are understandable, in light of No Child Left Behind, the federal law that requires all students to be proficient in math and reading by 2014.

"It's going to take dollars to reach those goals," he said.

Risch said the study confirms the need to "recalibrate our funding and align it with state academic standards."

"What we expect of our schools is significantly different than what was expected a generation ago," she said.

While academic standards have risen, the state's share of education funding has dropped from 50 percent prior to 1990 to less than 36 percent today.

To make up the difference, districts have had to increase property taxes.

The study found that poor districts tend to have the highest academic needs and the highest taxes, while wealthier districts have fewer academic needs and lower taxes.

To adequately educate students, the study found, the poorest 20 percent of districts in the state would have to increase spending by nearly 35 percent; the wealthiest 20 percent would need to boost spending by 6.6 percent.

Additional revenue to improve student performance should come from the state and be allocated through a formula that is sensitive to the needs and wealth of all school districts, the study recommends.

To advocates like Risch, that means overhauling the existing funding system, with the state paying a bigger share of education costs.

She's optimistic the costing-out study will spur legislators to consider funding formula changes.

A bill introduced in the state House last month would create a joint legislative commission to study public school financing.

State Rep. Mike Sturla of Lancaster is a co-sponsor of the legislation, which was referred to the House Education Committee.

Sturla could not be reached for comment Wednesday. Attempts to reach other state lawmakers from Lancaster County for comment on the study's findings were unsuccessful.

"This is only the first step in the road, and change will come only if (lawmakers) are willing to keep walking down that path," Solanco superintendent Martin Hudacs said.

"The major issues are still to come, but if this gets the conversation started, that's a good thing."

E-mail: bwallace@lnpnews.com