



Go to school on it

Lancaster Sunday News
November 18, 2007

Now that the Legislature knows how much it should cost to educate children, it needs to find a way to pay that bill. HR 460 is a start.

Knowledge, they say, is power.

Now that we know it will cost \$4.61 billion more to educate children properly in this state, how can we translate that knowledge into power?

The most obvious answer: The General Assembly needs to pass a House resolution establishing an independent commission to study the way the state funds public education.

Last week, a new study (at www.pde.state.pa.us/stateboard_ed/lib/stateboard_ed/PA_Costing_Out_Study_Final.pdf) found what most observers figured it would find: Pennsylvania's children are getting an underwhelming quality of education.

The "costing-out" study, intended to determine what this state needs to spend to guarantee each child a solid education, reported that the average per-student spending necessary is \$12,057, but the real average statewide is just \$9,512. Of 501 districts in the state, 474 are spending less per student than their costing-out estimate.

And the disparity is even wider for poorer districts; the study said that the 20 percent of districts with the lowest income levels would have to raise their spending by 34.9 percent per student, while the wealthiest 20 percent only have a 6.6 percent shortfall.

Two-thirds of the total estimated cost of \$21.86 billion (\$4.61 billion more than what state and local sources now invest in schools) is needed for basic education. Another 13.3 percent is for special education, and 9.4 percent is connected to the extra needs of children living in poverty.

Just 2.7 percent is needed for English-language learners.

So what our schools need most is money for the basics, not the extras.

Now the question for lawmakers and policymakers is: What are you going to do about it?

The Legislature invested more than \$644,000 in the study, authorized in 2006. While our lawmakers have been known to wear the dunce cap on occasion, it would be even dumber than usual to pay for this report and then let it gather dust on some Harrisburg shelf.

Instead, lawmakers should study up on the independent finance commission that would be created by House Resolution 460, sponsored by Reps. John Siptroth, D-Monroe County, and Beverly Mackereth, R-York County.

HR460, now in the House Education Committee, has among its co-sponsors Reps. Mike Sturla, D-96th District, and Bryan Cutler, R-100th District, from Lancaster County.

The commission would include 41 members from the education, business and public policy sectors, whose task would be to analyze the costing-out study and use the results to recommend possible changes in the way Pennsylvania funds its schools.

Its members would have a year from their first meeting to propose funding-formula changes, and the Legislature then would be tasked with developing legislation based on the commission's recommendations.

We have long advocated for comprehensive school-funding reform that does more than try to paper over the inequities and failures of the current cobbled-together system.

An independent commission could take a comprehensive view of school finance, rather than engage in quick fixes that end up as long-term failures. (Act 50 and Act 1, two of the most recent "reform" laws, anyone?)

Just throwing money at the schools won't fix the problems. But the costing-out study, by clearly identifying the deficiencies of Pennsylvania's public education financing, can be leveraged into legislative action that actually might accomplish something tangible for our kids.

Now that's power.