

Hazleton Area needs to spend \$43.3 million more, study says

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Hazleton Area School District would have to increase its annual spending by about \$43.3 million to ensure that all of its students are meeting state academic achievement standards, according to a statewide costing-out study of the public education system.

The study found that 474 of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts are spending below their adequacy levels and that the statewide public education system is underfunded by about \$4.61 billion.

The study reported on school district spending in 2005-06 and was geared at generating an ideal per-pupil spending level for each district. That figure was then compared to what was actually spent.

A costing-out analysis established a base cost per student and identified additional money needed by each district for addressing needs of economically disadvantaged students, English language learners (ELL students) and students enrolled in special education programs.

That base amount was also adjusted in relation to whether a district is considered growing, rural or facing other challenges.

The study did not account for money spent on transportation, construction and food service costs but reviewed spending in successful school districts, research on effective educational techniques and listed opinions from educators on how to improve student performance.

According to the study, Hazleton Area spent about \$7,499 on each of its 9,783 students in 2005-06. But the costing-out study said that Hazleton Area's average per pupil expense was about \$4,429 lower than it should've been – the 15th largest funding gap. The study says the district should've been spending about \$11,928 per pupil – or about \$43.4 million more than it actually spent.

Superintendent Frank Victor said it would be unrealistic to think local funding sources could provide that additional revenue.

“They're looking at ideal situations that could occur,” Victor said. “The reality is there is no way we would be able to come up with that type of funding with the current funding sources we have. Unless huge amounts of money are going to be funneled into the education system, it's just not going to come from the local tax system.”

Victor said a staffing study prepared by National Management Associates indicated that the district was under-spending, but not to the extent pointed out in the costing-out analysis.

“Our budget is at \$100 million – you’d be increasing our budget by 40-some percent,” he said.

The study examines the cost of education per student and while it considers the impact of the local tax effort, it wasn’t intended to determine how the state should generate the additional funds for education.

That will be left to the General Assembly.

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