

A new way is sought for school funds

By Dan Hardy
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A bipartisan group of state lawmakers, including some legislative leaders, is pushing for the speedy formation of a broad-based commission to find a new way of funding education in Pennsylvania.

The impetus for the proposal is the release this week of a study that said it would take an additional \$4.8 billion to adequately fund the state's public schools.

"I didn't want to see it sit on the shelf someplace," said Rep. John Siptroth (D., Monroe), the chief House sponsor of the commission resolution, which has garnered a bipartisan group of 39 cosponsors. "I'm hoping we can really get something out of this - and soon."

The study, commissioned by the legislature, said that school districts should be spending an average of \$12,057 per student to provide all children with an education that met state standards, but that they actually were spending only \$9,512. The study listed 474 of the state's 501 school districts as underfunding education.

State funding now pays for about 37 percent of the cost of public-school education; that percentage ranks near the bottom nationally. If the study's recommendations are adopted, state spending would increase to 60 percent.

If the commission is formed and its recommendations implemented, it would be the first comprehensive overhaul of education spending in Pennsylvania since the early 1990s.

Siptroth and his House colleagues have proposed the formation of a 45-member Joint Legislative Commission on Public School Finance. The same resolution has been introduced in the Senate, also with bipartisan support.

The commission would have a year to come up with at least two formulas "for the adequate and equitable distribution of state funds for the support of public schools." It also would look at other issues, including the feasibility of merging small school districts or finding ways they could share resources.

The commission would include a cross section of public-school-education stakeholders, along with legislators. "If we just had Republican and Democratic legislators on the commission, that would be entirely too political," Siptroth said. "I think this is a good mix; by appointing this commission, I'm hopeful that we can come up with a good process - a formula for addressing school-district needs."

The idea is gathering steam. In a statement yesterday, House Majority Whip Keith McCall (D., Carbon) called for the swift formation of the commission, saying: "Now that we have this independent analysis, it's time for the next step."

Erik Arneson, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R., Delaware), said that "the commission is in all likelihood the next step" after the study is reviewed by the Education Committee.

Rep. Beverly Mackereth (R., York), a cosponsor, said yesterday that House GOP leaders had told her they supported the commission initiative.

"We need to equalize the state and local share and come up with a quality education for all," she said. "We would be making a huge mistake to have the information we have now and not do something with it."

State Sen. Patrick Browne (R., Lehigh), the chief Senate sponsor of the commission legislation, said he believed there was a good chance it would be approved. "We are interested in taking this to the next step and developing recommendations," he said yesterday. "The goal is to get it done before Christmas."

Other forces are mobilizing as well. The Pennsylvania State Board of Education will be holding six public hearings across the state in the coming weeks to explain the study and take comment; the Philadelphia-area sessions will be at Upper Darby High School on Nov. 27 and Benjamin Franklin High School in Philadelphia on Nov. 28.

Education advocates say they will make the report the centerpiece of their efforts. It will be "the vehicle for talking about schools and the fact that there is real need for more money that is going unmet, not just in Philadelphia, but statewide," said Helen Gym, a leader of Parents United for Public Education, a Philadelphia parents' group.

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