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CLASS(ROOM) WARFARE

NOW WE'LL SEE IF HARRISBURG IS SERIOUS ABOUT EDUCATION

WE'LL SOON know just how serious Pennsylvania legislators are about fixing an out-of-whack school-funding system that leaves far too many districts, including Philadelphia's, short of the cash needed to adequately educate their children.

The House subcommittee on education will vote this week on House Resolution 460, which would create a 40-member joint legislative commission to recommend changes in how the state funds its 501 school districts.

It would be inexcusable for members of the education committee, chaired by Rep. James Roebuck, D-Phila., not to send the resolution to the floor. And just as inexcusable for House members not to quickly vote on the measure.

Because there's a crisis here.

Nearly 95 percent of the state's 501 school districts don't receive enough money from the state, according to the recent "costing out" report done for the state board of education. It comes as no surprise that Philadelphia is among the 474 inadequately funded districts.

The state should be spending an average of \$12,057 per student so they can meet performance standards in math and reading, the report said. It actually spends \$9,512. Philadelphia educators have complained for years that not enough money flowed into the district from the state. Now the study offers solid proof of those claims: Philadelphia students are shorted more than \$5,000 because our costs actually are \$14,919.

The education "haves," like Lower Merion and Bryn Athyn in Montgomery County, have a solid property tax base to adequately fund their needs. But hundreds of thousands of other students in the commonwealth are hurting. The state is chipping in \$4.6 billion less than it should to educate them.

It's time to make amends before another generation of Pennsylvania public school children gets less of an education than rightfully deserved.

The commission, which would include the secretary of education, teachers, parents, businesspeople and representatives from vocational and charter schools (interestingly, no students), would be charged with developing at least two formulas for "adequate and equitable" funding. This is a huge responsibility, especially when one solution - a tax increase - is a tough sell.

The joint commission's report, expected a year after it first meets, should also consider findings from the Task Force on School Cost Reduction. In November, the task force released "Driving More Dollars into the Classroom" with recommendations on how to pick up more money for education by reducing costs in health care, using "green" building technology and establishing a

single statewide tuition rate for cyber charter schools. Estimated savings: \$1 billion over five years.

The momentum appears good for school funding reform. It lacks the emotionalism of gun-control legislation, and its intense lobbying. Plus, the pain is clearly shared across the state.

And states must find a way to meet the requirements of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law with decreased federal funding. The Philadelphia school district has faced myriad problems: budget deficits, a high percentage of dropouts, the need for reduced class sizes - and the Philadelphia Parking Authority, which would rather pay its executives exorbitant salaries than make good on its word to provide \$45 million to the school district. The atmosphere is prime for school-reform funding.

Let's not muck it up with political gamesmanship or inaction. *