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## For more school \$, expect tax hikes

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Getting nearly \$5 billion of new funding into Pennsylvania's schools is an enormous task, and will be far more difficult than issuing a report, according to the lawmakers who would have to write the check.

Republican and Democratic state lawmakers said yesterday that the annual funding increases recommended in the state Department of Education's "costing-out study" can be realized only through unpopular mega tax hikes.

"We just went through a budget cycle where the governor proposed seven tax increases and none were approved," said David Atkinson, an aide to Sen. Gibson E. Armstrong, R-Lancaster and York county, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee. "I think that indicates the legislators have heard from their constituents, and they are not interested in higher taxes."

Sen. Gerald J. LaValle, the ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, said that although he believes the state should boost its contribution to local school districts from 37 percent to 50 percent of their budgets, that's easier said than done.

"Everybody has to understand that to get there, there has to be a large influx of dollars," said LaValle, a former schoolteacher who represents Beaver and Lawrence counties. "I don't care who's footing that bill, that's tax dollars. So, there we are."

The study, which the General Assembly ordered the state Department of Education to carry out, is the first of its kind in Pennsylvania. It is designed to determine the minimum cost to provide each child with a quality education that would allow him or her to attain state academic standards, taking into account specific needs and communities.

The study found that 95 percent of the state's 501 school districts are underfunded.

Using 2005-06 figures, researchers from the Denver education-finance firm of Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, estimated that school funding should be \$4.6 billion higher - or 26.8 percent - than the \$17.25 billion spent.

The funding shortage would grow to \$4.8 billion if the 27 school districts that spend more than required for adequacy continue to do so, the study said.

If the study's funding recommendations were enacted, average per-pupil spending across the state would jump from \$9,512 to \$12,057.

In Philadelphia, per-pupil spending would jump \$4,972, from about \$10,000 to \$14,919.

"That's right in the ball park. That's average," Molly A. Hunter, executive director of the nonprofit National Access Network, said of the findings.

Hunter, whose organization tracks education issues with funding from Columbia University's Teachers College, said similar studies in other states have been instrumental in reforming deficient funding systems.

"Generally, they are not ignored," she said. "How they are factored into a new funding formula varies a lot. The fact that the Legislature asked for this study, as opposed to some advocacy organization, would tend to make you believe that it will be taken seriously by the legislators."

Some Pennsylvania lawmakers have already signaled that they favor starting the discussion about overhauling the funding system, which relies heavily on local property taxes.

"Now that the costing-out study has been completed, it is time to work together on a school funding formula that adequately and equitably funds public education," state Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak said in a statement on behalf of Gov. Rendell's administration.

State House Majority Leader Bill DeWeese, Majority Whip Keith McCall and Education Committee Chairman James Roebuck issued a joint statement saying that the release of the study is "a significant step toward reforming the way young people are taught and the way schools are funded."

The Democrats also endorsed passage of a resolution that would create a 40-member commission to study the funding issue and submit proposals to the Legislature on how to improve the system.

Meanwhile, some states have already enacted the findings of their funding studies, while others have let the findings linger.

The first such study was commissioned by the Massachusetts Business Alliance in 1991, according to the Education Policy and Leadership Center, a Harrisburg-based advocacy organization.

Since then, more than 50 studies have been produced across the country in some 40 states.

Among them:

\* Maryland - In 2002 the Legislature agreed to phase-in a new funding system over six years. The move will eventually increase state school aid by \$1.3 billion annually and increase state education spending from 41 to 49 percent.

\* Washington state - Though a January study recommended increased spending of \$3.45 billion or 45 percent, there has been no legislative action to date. \*