

Editorial | Funding Pa. Schools

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Study time is over

Just wait till the costing-out study comes out.

For months (years?), education advocates across Pennsylvania have been waiting with bated breath for an accurate analysis of education funding in the state.

The expectation has been that once those who should be concerned (yes, that would be state legislators) were confronted with indisputable data showing how badly public schools are funded, they would be moved to do something about it.

Well, the long-awaited study finally came out a little more than two weeks ago - and granted, that's not a very long time - but the reaction so far hasn't been exactly overwhelming.

Sure, those stalwarts who have long been fighting the good fight for more money for schools have tried to use the costing-out study to drum up support. But it's hard to gauge whether they're winning any real converts.

Typically, Republican legislators are reluctant to jump on the bandwagon for anything that might require a tax adjustment.

"The first step is to put in place a strong accountability system to see if what you're spending money on is effective," said House Republican spokesman Steve Miskin.

Well, duh. Of course, public money must be spent effectively. If any additional accounting infrastructure is needed to further assure that, then fine, do that.

But, please, don't let a windy discussion of fiscal accountability obscure the bottom line. That is, Pennsylvanians need to spend more money to educate their children.

Some affluent communities are doing better than OK by adding many more thousands of dollars per-student to what the state provides. Other districts do well with the funding they get now because their students don't come to school with as many of the social and medical problems that can hamper classroom learning.

But most Pennsylvania schools are more challenged than that.

The study released Nov. 14 said 474 of the state's 501 school districts were underfunded. It said Pennsylvania would need to increase education funding by \$4.8 billion a year to ensure that all of its schools could meet the federal No Child Left Behind goals by 2014.

With the state already spending a third of its budget on education - \$9 billion this year - it's going to be tough to get legislative approval of a significant increase.

But Pennsylvania ranks 45th among the 50 states in the level of state support sent to local schools. It should do better, as should those school districts that can provide more local support.

An effort is under way to set up a bipartisan legislative commission on education funding. That's a good idea only if the panel isn't used as a subterfuge to further delay action. Pennsylvania's children deserve better than that.

The costing-out study is out, but we're still waiting for action.