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With \$4.8 billion price tag to fund education in Pa., what's next?

Lawmakers face a challenge

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It's the \$4.8 billion question: Now that Pennsylvania has the results of a major "costing-out" study on the price of meeting statewide education standards, what is the Legislature going to do about it?

The Legislature commissioned the study in July 2006, appropriating \$648,000 for a consulting firm to come up with a dollar figure on how much it would cost in each school district to meet state standards.

The study, by Denver-based Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, determined that for the 2005-06 school year, the state and school districts would have needed to spend an average of \$12,057 per pupil. In that school year, the state actually spent an average of \$9,512.

And the very big difference between those two funding levels has policy makers scrambling for the right thing to do.

Pat Browne, a Republican from Allentown, is hoping to have legislation passed by Christmas that would set up a commission to decide how to adjust school funding formulas in light of the costing-out study.

The commission, he hopes, would take "very aggressive action" to come out with new funding recommendations within six months to a year of its formation.

The \$4.8 billion figure, he said, should not dissuade the Legislature from incorporating the report's recommendations.

"What's important in terms of that number is to recognize the fact that it will need to happen over time," he said. "It's not going to happen over one budget cycle."

But for other legislators, spending billions more on education is simply not going to happen.

"I think there are many of us who believe we're spending a lot of money already and the taxpayers do not offer an endless pot of gold," said Daryl Metcalfe, R-Cranberry. "We have to find ways to do it better at reduced cost."

Mr. Metcalfe, a member of the House Education Committee, said that he can't understand spending \$3,000 more per pupil "while you have many spending less than \$9,000 who are doing a great job."

One of those districts, Penn-Trafford, spent \$7,034 per pupil and was among just seven districts statewide recognized in the study for achieving "successful" results with relatively low spending.

Still, to achieve 100 percent proficiency in reading and math, the report says Penn-Trafford would need to spend \$10,700 per pupil.

Penn-Trafford Superintendent Deborah Kolonay said that amounts to \$17 million in a district where the annual budget is about \$43.5 million.

With additional money, she said, the district could pay for things it has been putting off, such as needed building renovations. As for the \$4 billion plus figure though, she said, "I think it's staggering."

The figure is an additional \$4.6 billion if the amount above the minimum that some districts are paying is not figured in.

Spending an additional \$4.6 billion would require an increase of about 48 percent in the sales tax, or a 47 percent increase in the personal income tax, said Erik Arneson, communications and policy director for Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi.

"We have not seen evidence that the public is willing to absorb that burden," he said.

The study has value in addition to the aggregate figure, some say.

"This is the first time now that we've had an independent organization verify the degree of underfunding of public education by the state," said Tim Allwein, assistant executive director for governmental and member relations for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "This is the first time it's really been backed by research."

When it comes to specific school districts, that research has raised some eyebrows in Western Pennsylvania.

The study reported that districts such as Pittsburgh, Wilkesburg and Duquesne -- each with some schools at least seriously lagging on state tests -- were spending enough to attain 100 percent proficiency in the 2005-06 school year, while districts such as Upper St. Clair and Mt. Lebanon -- both among the highest achieving school districts in the state -- were not spending enough.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt said he already knew Pittsburgh spends more than similarly situated districts do. The study said it spends \$2,518 more per student than the recommended minimum.

"But we do not take it to mean that we spend too much money," he said.

He noted that most of Pittsburgh's money is local, not state, and Pittsburgh has been working to reduce its expenses, including making more than \$25 million in budget cuts in recent years.

Donna Durno, executive director of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and superintendent of record of the Duquesne City School District, said, "We're trying to get our arms around what the study means."

The study concluded that Duquesne spends enough -- even \$419 more per child -- to educate students. But Dr. Durno said Duquesne's costs are driven by, among other things, a high portion of special education students who have expensive placements, a high portion of students in poverty, declining enrollment and payments to charter schools.

"I don't want to say that I don't believe in the study. I just know what we're dealing with is a very difficult situation," she said.

Dr. Durno hopes the study will lead to more money for education, but she also said she needs to be realistic.

"What you have is so many really legitimate needs competing for limited dollars," she said.

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