

Many believe school funding isn't equitable, poll finds

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By Anya Sostek, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There is widespread concern about fairness in Pennsylvania school funding, according to a poll released yesterday from the Harrisburg-based Education Policy and Leadership Center.

Only 30 percent of those surveyed said that school funding is fair in Pennsylvania, with more than 90 percent of respondents saying that the quality of public schools varies from district to district.

"It's important that [lawmakers] understand that the public does think this is a big issue, and that there's a consensus across the state that education funding isn't fair and that the state is responsible for fixing it," said Ron Cowell, president of EPLC.

The survey comes in advance of a major report to be released next week that calculates the cost per pupil for a school district to meet the state's academic standards. The General Assembly agreed to pay \$650,000 for the comprehensive "costing out" study, which is being steered by the state board of education and researched by a Denver-based consultant.

That study is expected to find that many school districts lack the resources for their students to be academically proficient, said Mr. Cowell.

The state of Pennsylvania contributes about 36 percent of the total cost of education, he said, compared with a national average of closer to 50 percent. Spending per pupil in Pennsylvania varies from a low near \$7,000 per pupil to a high near \$17,000.

"We are overly dependent on property taxes to fund schools," said Mr. Cowell.

While nearly 90 percent of those surveyed said that the state should be responsible for ensuring equal access to quality education, there wasn't nearly as much agreement on how to fund an increased state contribution.

Thirty-one percent thought an increase in the state sales tax would be the fairest way to raise state funds, while 14 percent preferred raising the income tax. Another 43 percent chose to raise "some other state tax" and 13 percent didn't know.

As for the quality of a Pennsylvania education, 51 percent of those polled said that the schools did a good or excellent job of preparing students for college, while 44 percent said that the schools did a good job preparing students for the job market.

The survey, conducted by the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin and Marshall College, reached 800 Pennsylvania adults by telephone in late September and early October.

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