

11/15/2007

readingeagle.com



## **Spending on students lowest in Reading, state report says**

*In response, the school board president notes that the figures are old and don't include major increases in recent funding from Harrisburg. And he says money doesn't always mean good education.*

### **Reading Eagle**

Berks County, PA - The Reading School District placed last in per-student spending out of the 501 Pennsylvania districts, according to a study released Wednesday.

The study, commissioned by the state Board of Education, concluded it would cost about \$22 billion a year to get all Pennsylvania students to meet the state's academic expectations.

That's about \$5 billion per year more than is currently being spent.

The study is intended to give policymakers a starting point for rethinking how to finance public education.

Reading's per-student spending, based on information from the 2005-06 fiscal year, was about \$5,500 — less than half of the study's suggested spending level of approximately \$12,000.

However, Reading has received a dramatic increase in state funding since 2005-06.

The state increased funding to the district by 23 percent in 2006-07 and another 11 percent in 2007-08. Those increases were the largest for any district in the state.

Much of the increased funding was in response to a \$5 million deficit the district faced as recently as 2002. Those financial problems were partly due to local property revenues dropping drastically, cutting the tax base.

"The study the state did seems to already be antiquated," Reading School Board President Keith R. Stamm said.

Stamm said numbers provided by the district administration to the board currently place per-student spending near \$9,000.

How districts use their money also should be considered, Stamm said.

"You don't always need to spend money to improve," he said. "It's not necessarily always about money."

Stamm said districts that spend money efficiently are made to look bad with studies such as this one because they take into account only overall spending, not the specifics of where the money is going.

Dr. Thomas R. Chapman, superintendent, could not be reached for comment.

Reading wasn't alone in falling below the study's suggested spending numbers. Only 27 districts spent more than the study recommended.

They include affluent suburban districts such as Lower Merion in Montgomery County; the financially and academically troubled Duquesne City School District in Allegheny County; and small, rural systems such as the Forest School District in northwestern Pennsylvania.

Similar studies aimed at attaching a price tag to student achievement have been conducted in nearly 40 other states since 1991, some of them commissioned by education advocacy groups and others ordered by courts to resolve school-funding lawsuits.

About two-thirds of the total cost set in the study relates to educating an average student.

It also includes a range of other costs, including serving students who need special education, speak English as a second language or live in high-poverty households.

The analysis also examined the spending of the most academically successful school districts.

©2007 Reading Eagle Company