



No copping out from costing-out

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A major study of public school financing is due Nov. 14, and the history of similar studies in other states indicates that it likely will say things about Pennsylvania's system that some state lawmakers don't want to hear.

In order to ensure that the report doesn't suffer the fate of others of its kind — that is, being placed on the shelf — Reps. John Siptroth and Beverly Mackereth have introduced a bill that would require further action by the Legislature. It's a pre-emptive strike against doing nothing.

The report, known as a “costing-out” study, is badly needed. Pennsylvania relies more on local property taxes and less on state government for education funding than most other states. Because of that, there are wide disparities in education funding among the state's 501 school districts, based largely upon disparities in local affluence.

Those disparities, in turn, make it difficult to determine what it actually costs in Pennsylvania to provide an “adequate” public education, as required by the state constitution. The “costing-out” study is meant to get a handle on that.

In other states where such studies have been conducted, a key conclusion often has been that the state government should take a lead role in eliminating local funding disparities. Hence, the potential reluctance among some lawmakers to take on the impending study's recommendations.

The bill introduced by Mr. Siptroth and Ms. Mackereth would create a 41-member Joint Legislative Commission on Public School Finance. It would try to shape a new funding structure for schools in accordance with the study's finding. Part of the study's mission is to identify the resources that every school in the state needs to meet state academic standards.

Inequitable public school funding has been a long-standing problem in Pennsylvania that is a factor in broad disparities in achievement levels among public schools. The “costing-out” study is a vital step in correcting those disparities. The proposed commission, or an instrument like it, is needed to maintain the momentum.