



Costing out only part of equation

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The long-awaited “costing-out” study of Pennsylvania public schools, which was commissioned by the state Legislature, quantifies what already was generally known: Pennsylvania’s government does not contribute an adequate share of public school costs, and there are vast inequities in funding among districts.

The analysis by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, of Denver, sought to find a cost-per-student for each Pennsylvania district that would ensure that all students meet state proficiency goals for reading and math by 2014.

According to the study, aggregate state-local public school spending of \$17.2 billion, statewide, was at least \$4.8 billion short of the \$22 billion that would be needed to produce proficiency. It found that none of 39 districts in Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike and Susquehanna counties spent the recommended amount per student required to meet the state goals.

The study is illuminating but not definitive. The factors that go into a district’s cost per student are vast, and it is difficult to reconcile cost per student with quality of instruction, although it is an indicator.

And, as it must, the study takes costs for what they are rather than what they could be. District budgets, and therefore their cost per student, vary widely according to the costs of salaries and benefit packages for teachers, but that does not necessarily mean that the district with the less expensive package produces inferior results.

Still, the study paints a clear big picture. Over-reliance on local property taxes to fund public education creates wide disparities in districts’ capabilities by tying them to local tax bases rather than to statewide educational standards. The state government is the only entity that can correct that.

Lawmakers who commissioned the study — by wide margins in both houses — should use the results to meet the state constitution’s guarantee of adequate public education. They should commit to a greater state contribution to public education as a percentage of the total. That means not just substituting the state’s share of casino revenue for local property taxes. That results in a local wash that will produce lower property taxes but leave each district with the same amount of overall funding it has now. Rather, the state government should increase overall educational spending, and direct it where it is needed most.