

A new formula for school funding

Here's hoping Rep. Bev Mackereth's proposed commission can finally rise above politics

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Oct 19, 2007 — There is no question, no controversy, no disputing that the formula Pennsylvania employs to fund public schools needs to be overhauled.

It needs more than an overhaul. It should be sent to the scrap yard and the state needs to get a brand-spanking new one.

So, get it done, right?

Well, not so fast.

Nearly everybody involved in public education agrees that the funding formula needs to be fixed. It's an issue that unites Democrats and Republicans, urban representatives and rural ones, the teachers' union and the school board association.

The problem is nobody seems to know what to do. Efforts to change the formula in the past have failed because the politics involved in such a major change quickly turn toxic. While the combatants are united in their desire to fix the formula, they often use the debate over the details to win political points rather than solving the problem. If that sounds familiar, it's a pretty accurate description of how Harrisburg works.

But now, one local state representative has reached across the aisle to try to solve the impasse. State Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, has joined Monroe County Democratic Rep. John Siptroth in calling for a special commission

to come up with suggestions for new school-funding formulas.

It may not seem like much, but it's a step - and it appears to have support in Harrisburg.

The proposed 41-member commission would include legislators, cabinet secretaries, school board members, school administrators, teachers and parents. It will be charged with examining the data collected in a school expense study due Nov. 14 and coming up with two formulas for state lawmakers to consider.

That may seem cumbersome, but it may be the only way this issue can be resolved. It's the Legislature's job to come up with a new formula - and in the end, the Legislature will have to do that - but past efforts by the General Assembly to do it on its own haven't been very productive.

The current formula dates to 1991 and, it almost goes without saying, things have changed significantly since then. The outdated formula shortchanges districts that

have experienced growth in recent years - particularly districts expanding because of migration from Maryland and New York - and forces a lot of local school districts to increase regressive property taxes.

"Pennsylvania's funding formula is broken," Rep. Mackereth said. "It does not work and it must be fixed."

Legislators, governors, school administrators, teachers, taxpayers and others have been saying that for years.

Let's hope this time something actually gets done.