

Guest Column: Basic education subsidy funds too vital to cut

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Times Guest Columnist

I'm not the type of person who constantly is looking back at a better time. My job as superintendent of Southeast Delco School District has me looking ahead, ensuring we are putting the resources of the school district to the best use possible, ever mindful of the evolving needs of students and teachers in the district. This perpetual motion of forward progress for our district affords me little time for looking backward.

But today I must do that, as our 4,100 students – along with 1.8 million public school students in the commonwealth – risk losing important achievement gains made, as the state budget under consideration in Harrisburg may cut the state basic-education subsidy, for the first time ever. This budgetary line item is the primary source of state financial support for school districts. We rely on this funding to plan our budgets and provide a quality education.

So here's where I must look back – for just a moment.

For the first time in almost two decades, the General Assembly approved a school funding formula in 2008 that included statutory language establishing clear funding goals for basic education in subsequent years. The plan was to make an initial down payment last year (which occurred) and then continue to fund the plan for five more years until the adequacy and equity benchmarks of all school districts were met.

But now, some legislators seem to be wavering on their commitment to the new school funding formula passed just one short year ago. We are all enduring tough financial times. That is not in dispute. As a response to a leaner economy, our school district cut more than \$1.5 million from our proposed budget, including significant reductions in after-school reading and math intervention services, contracted transportation services, and the elimination of teacher positions through attrition. And even after these cuts, we were forced to raise taxes more than 5 percent for the 2009-10 school year to allow us to continue our improvement in student achievement.

Without an increase in basic-education funding, we will have to go back to the drawing board and re-evaluate our programs. Over the past two years, we have used the increased state funding to allow us to provide a full-day kindergarten program to 300 students and increased counseling services at the secondary level. Without the additional state funding, we will have to review all programs to make

additional program cuts.

But it doesn't have to be that way. The governor's proposed budget includes an increase of \$300 million for basic education, in keeping with year two funding of the formula passed last year.

Supporters of budget proposals that cut state funding for basic education and use stimulus dollars to level fund schools argue that districts still will receive substantial funding increases from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), so we don't need an increase in basic education funding. But that argument is misleading. These funding increases come from Title I and IDEA stimulus funds, and substantial federal restrictions apply to the use of these funds. They must go toward furthering education services for impoverished and special-needs students. Although my district is Title I eligible, officials with the U.S. Department of Education have told us we should not use these funds to supplant funding for current programs, as some legislators indicate we should.

Stimulus funds were designed to augment education spending, not replace it.

That is why maintaining the state's investment in basic-education funding is so important. It would close the gap to ensure our district could continue to provide full-day kindergarten, continue reading and math intervention services, and continue our increased counseling services that were added last year when the General Assembly made the commitment to close the funding adequacy gap and implement a formula. We cannot use increases in IDEA or Title I funding to replace lost state funding.

We cannot afford to go back. Our students deserve the best education possible. We need to continue our commitment to fund all schools adequately. We need to do the right thing and restore – and enhance – the basic education subsidy. We need this investment in our children.

Stephen Butz is the superintendent of the Southeast Delco School District.