



## We can't afford to cut funding for the coming year

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Another year, another budget impasse in Harrisburg, and the subject of funding for education is at center stage.

Huge cuts in educational spending have been proposed by the state; these cuts were rejected by the state House of Representatives last week.

If something like Senate cuts were enacted as part of a budgetary compromise, the damage to public schools would be immense.

Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, said: "Students in the most financially distressed communities would take the hardest hit. Reading School District, for instance, with 80 percent of its students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program, would see a \$2,200 cut per student in state funding, which constitutes a 38 percent cut in its state education subsidy"

Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak, state education secretary, pointed out in a letter to school district superintendents that if the Senate proposal had become law, it would have eliminated the \$317 million in fiscal stabilization grants intended to avoid property tax hikes and staff cuts and investments in proven academic programs.

In a year when the state budget shortfall is estimated to be \$3 billion, why should education be spared the pain that programs in the areas of mental health, library services, or even the Conrad Weiser Homestead may suffer?

With the passage of Act 61 last year, Pennsylvania took giant steps forward to fund schools more equitably by adopting a formula that tied increased state funding to districts that had concentrations of children in poverty, children needing instruction in English in order to achieve success in the public schools and children in special-education programs.

To the credit of Gov. Ed Rendell and members of the Legislature, they implemented this formula and increased basic education funding by \$273 million.

School districts were not given a blank check. New accountability rules were applied to those districts that received dollars exceeding last year's inflation index of 4.4 percent. Districts were required to use at least 80 percent of the funding above the index to create more effective programs and practices.

District spending plans were to focus on seven practices that correlated highly with measures of student achievement. Among the practices approved for investment were increased instructional time, staff development programs, reduction in class sizes, and expanded pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs.

On May 26, representatives from several organizations testified on the positive impact of the Act 61 formula and the increased state funding in last year's budget. The groups included the Education Law Center, Good Schools Pennsylvania, the Easton branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Lansdowne Ministerium and two school districts, Baldwin-Whitehall and Norristown.

The panel's testimony highlighted the progress made in just one year:

In Reading the school district expanded full-day kindergarten, hired several teachers to reduce class sizes, provided more than 5,000 hours of after-school tutoring and enrolled thousands of students in 14 virtual high schools.

In York the school district hired teachers for English-learners' classrooms, for reading and math classrooms and for expanded full-day kindergarten classrooms.

In Easton teachers and administrators received training in diversity to help both sets of professionals deal more effectively with their student body.

Ruby Payne led an all-day workshop on the impact of poverty for the entire district staff.

Money well spent? You bet. When last year's budget was passed, both Rendell and the legislative leaders emphasized that it would take several years to get the dollars needed to fund fully the new formula, which was developed from the state's Costing Out Study, the goal of which was to help the state reach 100 percent student academic proficiency by in 2014.

Last year's progress cannot be thrown out in the face of a difficult economy.

Think of this: 41 percent of all prisoners have not completed high school. The average cost of incarcerating an individual is \$32,000 while the annual cost of a quality public education averages about \$11,000.

Where would you like to have your tax dollars invested?

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