

Adequate school funding is budget priority

May 30, 2008

Sunday is June 1 and state lawmakers have just one month to draft a state budget. The most important issue lawmakers must decide is whether to approve Gov. Ed Rendell's proposal to begin addressing the long-ignored need to make state funding of public education more equitable. That's why Education 2010!, the local good-schools group, held a breakfast meeting with state legislators in Allentown yesterday. At the top of the meeting's agenda was support for the governor's plan to commit to a six-year, \$2.6 billion increase in funding for public schools.

For years, Pennsylvanians have complained that state government hasn't adequately supported public education. For years, state lawmakers have avoided their responsibility. As a result, school districts and local taxpayers have had to shoulder more and more of the burden of educating our children.

But, no one ever had hard numbers on what it should cost to educate our children. The only yardstick was what wealthier districts spent per-pupil compared to less-wealthy districts. No one thought broadly, how the economic future of communities and the state depended on having well-educated graduates. And then, there is the challenge that every school in state in the nation must meet the education standards of the No Child Left Behind Act by 2014.

So, last year the General Assembly received the results of the first-ever [Pennsylvania Costing-Out Study](#). It concluded that it takes \$12,057 to adequately educate each public school student for a year. The statewide average per-pupil funding level is just \$9,512. The Costing-Out Study found that public education is under-funded by \$4.4 billion.

Related links

- [Good Schools Pennsylvania](#)
- [Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign](#)

Clearly, what Gov. Rendell has proposed falls short of the need. However, it is a significant and crucial step toward a fairer, more dependable system of funding public schools that should help assure that children will receive the education they need to meet NCLB standards and be prepared to help Pennsylvania compete in the global economy.

The easy part of Gov. Rendell's proposal is adoption of the first \$291 million installment toward this goal in the education budget for the coming year. This represents almost a 6 percent increase in public education funding over the current budget. The hard part will be getting lawmakers to commit to continuing to increase school funding by \$2.6 billion, even though that's still less than what's needed, for the next six years.

There also is horse trading in Harrisburg over legislative issues and the budget. Gov. Rendell has identified health-care reform, changes in funding transportation and highway needs and an energy program as priorities. Some Republican lawmakers want more school property-tax relief.

Some in the Legislature want to study the ramifications of the Costing-Out Study. That's a delay tactic, an exercise made unnecessary by the governor's education budget initiative. Besides, Pennsylvania can't afford to delay action. Our children can't afford another year of being denied equitable, quality education.

Nothing is more important to the future of Pennsylvania than adopting Gov. Rendell's \$2.6 billion school funding proposal. None of the Governor's or lawmakers' other priorities have the reach of an efficient and effective school funding system. Those who argue that Pennsylvanians can't afford to invest more in public education are wrong. In fact, if the state increases its support of public schools and establishes a fair formula for funding local school districts, it will do as much, if not more, to reduce local school property taxes than revenue from slots casinos.

As Parkland School Director Roberta Marcus has described it, an effective education system is the hub of good government and a healthy and productive state. Business leaders across the state understand how critical good public schools are to economic development. All other issues radiate from this hub. Today, the wheel is broken. Lawmakers must repair it. Approving Gov. Rendell's \$2.6-billion, six-year plan for public schools would be a tremendous start.