

Above the fray: Politics must not scuttle changes in school funding

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As Gov. Ed Rendell and Republicans in the state Senate face off over increasing school subsidies for next year, another issue regarding the way in which public education is funded must not fall victim to their squabbling.

Last Monday, the Senate Appropriations Committee voted 16-10 to slash the funding increase Rendell is seeking by more than 40 percent, from \$291 million to \$118 million.

This might be politics as usual in Harrisburg. During budget talks, politics and power plays dominate the process.

But as Good Schools Pennsylvania, a nonprofit education advocacy group, has pointed out, the problem is as much the way public education is funded as it is the amount of money involved.

Per pupil spending in Pennsylvania can vary by thousands of dollars from school district to school district. To make its point, the organization held an interesting demonstration in Harrisburg to illustrate the disparities in school funding between affluent and poor school districts.

The Associated Press reported the group used an arts-and-crafts project in which four groups had to color and cut out drawings of people, but only one was given enough supplies to complete the assignment. Others struggled with scissors that didn't work, instructions written in gibberish and an insufficient supply of crayons and markers.

Good Schools sees Rendell's increase as the first step toward substantially increasing state funding to needy school districts with high tax rates, the news service reported. The group is concerned that the committee's vote is a step in the wrong direction.

"Backing away from a permanent school funding formula means that the responsibility for adequately funding our schools will continue to fall on local taxpayers, perpetuating the inequities among school districts," it wrote in an e-mail.

The commonwealth's funding formula for public education does need to be revamped, and legislation has been introduced to do that. This is an issue that should be above politics. Unfortunately, at this time of year, everything in Harrisburg is about politics. We can only hope that this political fight doesn't permanently damage this important effort.