

The Evening Sun

Fix for school funding a start

By TOM JOYCE

For The Evening Sun

Article Launched: 07/14/2008 09:40:37 AM EDT

State Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, said it wasn't the most dignified moment in her career as a lawmaker.

It was about two weeks ago, and she had the microphone during a meeting of the Republican caucus in the state House of Representatives. They were discussing the state's new school funding formula and how to even things out after nearly two decades of a skewed system.

The discussion turned to how much funding the state should allocate to districts that did well under the previous system. How could they square things off with places such as York County, which took a bath for years?

State Rep. Steve Nickol, R-Hanover, whispered something to state Rep. Ron Miller, R-Jacobus. Miller whispered it to Mackereth, who said it aloud at the mike.

"The other districts would owe us money!"

Then all three fought to control their snickering, the caucus secretary looking on like a fed-up fifth-grade teacher.

They couldn't help themselves. They felt giddy.

Members of the York County statehouse delegation had been working for years to change a glitch in the state's school funding formula, which tended to penalize growing districts such as most of those in York County.

For much of that time, they had difficulty getting their statehouse colleagues to even acknowledge the problem, much less fix it.

The state budget that passed earlier this month finally included a new formula for funding public schools in Pennsylvania, designed to create a rational underpinning for the process. A costing out study that Mackereth sponsored last year helped serve as a catalyst for the new system.

Nickol's joke aside, no districts owe money to other districts. Everybody is getting something from the state - although some districts are receiving a far smaller piece of the pie than they're used to.

Mackereth said the new formula isn't perfect and will need some tweaking in the future.

The important thing for the measure's supporters is that it's based on a consistent formula that takes into account the size of the school districts.

"This shows that good things can happen," Mackereth said.

The problem started in 1991, which was a notoriously difficult budget year. Lawmakers had to deal with a \$2 billion deficit, a 50-percent personal income tax jump, and a budget that came in 35 days late.

Amid all the chaos and compromises, lawmakers somehow managed to change the way the state allocates education funding. Basically, the funding was no longer based on the number of students who attend a given district.

The amount of funding the districts get might go up or down by a certain percentage. But ultimately, it would be based on what enrollment was in 1991, with no real bearing on how much the district has grown or shrunk since then.

Nobody paid much attention at first. Over the years, however, the effects started to kick in. The arrangement was beneficial for districts that have diminished in size since the early a'90s. But it's been gradually bleeding areas such as York County, which have growing populations.

State Rep. Eugene DePasquale, the York County statehouse delegation's lone Democrat, joined his Republican colleagues in pushing for the issue. After last year's budget passage, he wrote an open letter to Rendell calling for such a change.

"There is very little debate that this is probably the best education funding formula for York County in two decades," DePasquale said.