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LTE: Public Education - A Sound Investment During Uncertain Times

While it may seem like a typical school year to public school students as they head back to the classroom, education advocates recognize that this is not a typical September.

For the first time in many years, public schools are opening their doors without funding from Harrisburg. After two months of debate, state legislators continue to grapple with the state budget. Until a budget is in place, the Commonwealth has no authority to pay school districts the education subsidies that support their operations.

Education advocates are urging the legislature to provide resources in the state budget to continue the academic progress of Pennsylvania schools.

Last year, the General Assembly passed a school funding formula that would move the state toward a fair and equitable funding system for all districts. The formula was based on a comprehensive, statewide costing-out study that found Pennsylvania's system of public education was under-funded by more than \$4 billion. Now, some lawmakers are backing a proposal to replace state dollars with temporary stimulus dollars. The impact of this proposal will be a reduction of state funding to 2005-06 levels.

At a time when there are few secure investments, communities, taxpayers and parents can be certain that investing in public education is a sound decision. A report released in August by the Center on Education Policy shows Pennsylvania students made gains in all academic categories from 2002-08. The CEP report is consistent with the findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress that found that Pennsylvania is one of only six states to make significant gains in elementary school reading and math scores since 2003.

In August, Governor Rendell recognized fifty districts for improving test results on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSA). Among those districts are Penns Valley (Centre County); Moshannon Valley (Clearfield County); Keystone Central (Clinton County); St. Marys (Elk County); Huntingdon and Juniata Valley (Huntingdon County); East Lycoming, Jersey Shore, South Williamsport and Williamsport (Lycoming County) and Otto-Eldred (McKean County).

A Quinnipiac University poll released in August affirmed Pennsylvanians' support for public schools. Asked if they would be willing to pay more taxes to protect state spending, a majority of the respondents said they would, in order to protect public schools from cuts.

We must encourage our legislators to bring the budget to closure, negotiate in good faith, and make adequate investments in public education. Governor Rendell initially proposed a \$418 million increase to keep the promise of the funding formula enacted last year, but he has since reduced that amount to \$300 million. The General Assembly should keep its commitment to children by increasing basic education funding by at least \$300 million.

Please contact your state legislator and tell them to keep their commitment to provide adequate funding for public education. In these uncertain times, public education is a sound investment for our children and our communities.

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