

# THE EVENING SUN

## York County schools studied for efficiency

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Most York County school districts spend less money than comparable districts in other parts of the state, which may account for the PSSA scores in 10 districts falling below state averages, according to a recently released study.

But the study of York County schools, conducted on behalf of the Center for Community Engagement at York College, also finds some of those districts use their resources more efficiently than others, and higher per-student spending doesn't always equal higher test scores.

Hanover Public School District, for example, was rated the least-efficient district in York County, meaning that while the district spends more than comparable school districts, its students score below the state average in both the reading and math portions of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test.

Hanover spends \$10,001 per pupil, above the state average of \$9,512. But its test scores are below state averages. Closer to the state average test scores in this area are South Western, which spends \$2,079 less per pupil than Hanover, and Spring Grove, spending \$1,942 less per pupil.

To determine a district's efficiency, the study's authors, Denver-based Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc., examined the district's resource use, or how the district spent its money in seven categories. The study considered a district's staffing - including teachers, teacher aides, school and district administration staff and support staff - regular and special education spending, average salaries and benefits of teachers, and maintenance and operation expenditures.

They were compared to districts of similar size that faced similar costs in educating their students and scored above the state average in both the reading and math PSSA in 2005-06. If a district used more resources than its comparison group, it was considered relatively inefficient.

According to the report, Hanover was considered relatively inefficient because it uses more resources in six of the seven categories than its comparison group on average, spending less only on its teacher aides.

At the same time, Hanover's district faced different factors than the other districts in the study, because it was the only small-sized district (containing 1,770 students) in the study, according to Suzanne McConkey of the Center for Community Engagement.

The study found almost no districts in Pennsylvania comparable in size to Hanover that were achieving above the state average on the PSSAs.

The lack of above-average performances among small-sized districts may indicate a larger problem with how smaller districts in the state are funded, according to the study.

A 2007 costing-out study completed by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates for the state Legislature recommended Hanover should be spending an estimated \$12,553 per pupil to meet the state's public education goals.

The district is looking over the details of the new study, according to Wesley Doll, Hanover's assistant superintendent.

"I'm sure it will provide really useful information for our school districts, and I'm looking forward to seeing how we can improve in the Hanover school district," Doll said.

Like Hanover, every other York County school district in the study reported a lack of adequate funding to meet student need.

"The fact that most York County districts use overall fewer resources than their peers but are below the state average in reading and math scores may indicate that they are simply having to make do with less available resources than other districts in the commonwealth," the report stated.

South Western Superintendent Barb Rupp said the study suggests a correlation between spending and test scores.

"I'm thrilled that we aren't spending lots and lots of money, but obviously we need to do something to improve student performances," Rupp said.

South Western in 2005-06 exceeded the state average in reading PSSA scores - but only by a single percentage point - and ranked significantly below average in math.

The study found that most of the districts (three out of five) that use more resources when compared to their peers are also among the highest performing districts in York County, and the majority of districts (10 out of 11) that use fewer resources compared to their peers have test scores that are below the statewide average.

South Western and Spring Grove were among the 11 districts that ranked "relatively efficient," in terms of their resource use, but did not have above-average PSSA scores in 2005-06.

The study also had several recommendations for improving efficiency and increasing cooperation among York County's school districts.

It recommended the districts create a regional cyber charter school so that students can be exposed to new classes; expand preschools; create a best-practices clearinghouse, or "think-tank" for districts to share information; address new school building construction issues; expand efforts to attract and retain quality teachers and administrators; and create a more-unified district calendar, so that staff from all the districts can collaborate more on in-service days.

"The recommendations had merit and we need to take a look at each one of them," said Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, who attended the meetings with the superintendents.

Spring Grove Superintendent David Stricker said that while the district has areas to improve upon, he is pleased with the overall results of the study.

"I think the leadership has to be there now. We need to have schools, legislators and community officials decide how we can use that report to improve," Stricker said.

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