

Revamp of funding plan a good first step

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Some folks, especially those who work in schools, probably found nothing surprising in a 2007 study of Pennsylvania's chronic underfunding of its public-education system.

The 2007 "costing out" study spearheaded by the Legislature found that the state shortchanges its public schools by about \$4 billion and spurred a budget-season campaign by Gov. Ed Rendell to increase the state's financial support of local schools.

Rendell last week signed legislation that will provide an additional \$275 million to basic education, the first step toward an overall goal of full funding for every student in the state by fiscal 2013-14.

This represents a much-needed and long overdue change for a state in which economic disparities between communities often influence the caliber of local educational opportunities.

Local school districts continue to complain of underfunding, and correctly point out that the basic-education subsidy increases — which hover in the 3 to 5 percent range for most local districts — represent a small fraction of their overall budgets.

But you really can't judge this plan based solely on the specific per-school increases, because it's intended to smooth out statewide inequities.

The new funding formula is bound to the actual number of enrolled students in a district, including students in poverty and English-language students. It accounts for differences in geographic details, district size and enrollment trends.

It also provides accountability: Districts with the most students that receive the most money will have to show how they plan to use the money to achieve improved results.

Essentially, the real point of the legislation is to reduce the impact of class and geographical factors in the school-funding equation to make sure students in poor districts get the same educational opportunities as those in affluent districts.

It could be some time before results can be accurately documented, but this plan takes a historic first step toward educational equity in Pennsylvania.

