

Don't turn away from progress in funding schools properly

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Those of us who live in the Lehigh Valley should take pride in knowing that recent efforts to craft a fair and equitable system of funding [Pennsylvania's](#) public schools began right here. But that system is about to be damaged or even undone as the Legislature moves toward completion of the state budget in the days ahead.

Legislators of both parties are talking about reducing the amount of state money supporting the school subsidy system for the first time ever and using short-term federal stimulus funds to replace it. That would be a serious mistake, given the unpredictability of the economy and federal funding. It is the wrong way to support the public schools, which are, after all, the only constitutionally required service in Pennsylvania.

How did we get to this point? Four years ago, a group of the Lehigh Valley's leaders in the form of Education 2010! decided that we needed good, solid information about the financial condition of the Allentown School District and how it is funded in comparison to other districts. We engaged the services of the nation's premier school finance consulting group -- Augenblich, Palaich and Associates from Denver. APA presented us with an eye-opening report in March 2006.

APA found that Allentown's students have greater needs than those in neighboring districts in the Valley, but that the district spends less per student than most of its neighbors. It does so despite having one of the highest tax rates, because property values and personal income in Allentown are lower than in surrounding communities. That's a perfect storm leading to a disastrous future. The students who need the most educational service receive the least. The taxpayers who can least afford to pay property taxes pay the most.

And the results in terms of student achievement -- and thus the future possibilities for Allentown students -- are dismal. We all concluded in 2006 that the Valley could not hope to achieve its potential under these circumstances. And we knew we could not solve these problems without a lot of help from the state. After all, the state constitution assigns the responsibility for supporting the public school system to the General Assembly.

So we went to our legislators and told them the state needed to do a similar study to determine what it would really cost if every Pennsylvania student in every community from [Philadelphia](#) to Erie were to have a real chance of meeting the state's academic standards. And all of them -- Sens. Browne and Boscola and all of our representatives -- supported our cause. The Legislature overwhelmingly approved Act 114 of 2006, which required the state Board of Education to contract for a statewide Costing-Out Study to determine the cost of helping all students meet state learning standards.

The State Board contracted with APA (the same firm that conducted the study here in the Lehigh Valley), and APA's statewide report in December 2007 was equally eye-opening. It found that across Pennsylvania we are collectively underfunding our schools by more than \$2,400 per pupil, and that 92 percent of all Pennsylvania students attend schools that are spending less than they should if all their students are to meet our standards for them. APA found that Allentown had the

fourth largest per pupil adequacy gap of the state's 500 school districts.

Acting upon the Costing-Out Study findings, Gov. Rendell proposed a new school funding system to be phased in over six years. The General Assembly approved that proposal in Act 61 of 2008. It also appropriated a first-year payment of \$275 million toward the estimated six-year funding increase of \$2.6 billion to provide an adequate and more equitable funding system for Pennsylvania students and local property taxpayers. This year, the governor proposed to make the full second-year payment based on the formula -- another \$418 million.

This is a difficult economic time. Legislators are called upon to choose among very worthy competing priorities. But this is not the time to turn away from the progress we've made in the past few years to fund our schools properly. We now know what it costs to give all our young people the education they will need to succeed in our increasingly global economy and to assure a brighter future for our community. We should do nothing less.

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