



Don't turn back clock on education subsidies

by Linda J. Bigos

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Children's education should be priority for Legislature.

A superintendent's job is to run a school district effectively and efficiently, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely, with children foremost in our minds.

And, while watching the bottom line and negotiating with vendors for items such as books and desks and computers comes with the territory, one thing that will never be negotiable is the quality of education we aim to provide to our students -- your children and our collective future.

At East Pennsboro Area School District, our vision statement of "World Class Performers and Productive Citizens" expresses our commitment to preparing our students for global competition and the work force of the 21st century.

The Legislature has a similar responsibility for government. Unfortunately, the budget stalemate is about many things -- with politics being front and center. But what should be the heart of this debate is the 1.8 million public school children in the commonwealth, including more than 2,900 children in the East Pennsboro Area School District.

Two budget bills, House Bill 1416 and Senate Bill 850, would reduce -- for the first time ever -- the state's investment in the basic education subsidy.

This budgetary line item is the primary source of state financial support for school districts. In my school district, the state's subsidy is expected to be 29 percent of the 2009-10 budget revenue, with 70 percent of the revenues supported by local effort and approximately 1 percent provided through federal funds.

On the East Shore, the West Shore and up and down the river, schools and students will be negatively impacted by legislators' failure to honor the commitment adopted in 2008 to advance a plan to achieve adequacy and equity of funding in all schools in Pennsylvania.

Legislators took the first step last year by making the initial "down payment," but they have five more years in their new subsidy formula to achieve true adequacy and equity. Now is not the time to turn back the clock.

Since superintendents are used to dealing with the bottom line, here's my bottom line: Both bills would set back student achievement at a time when we need to invest in the future more than ever.

At East Pennsboro, flat funding from the state will force us to halt the purchase of any new books or updated equipment. Our school board approved a no-tax-increase budget in anticipation of the General Assembly honoring its commitment to schools and increasing funding for basic education. Inevitably, all superintendents and school boards will have to find the resources to support this commitment, ever mindful of the tax burden placed on our citizens.

Supporters of basic education cuts argue that districts still will receive substantial education funding increases from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, but this argument is misleading. These funding increases are Title I (remedial support) and IDEA (special education) stimulus funds, and substantial federal restrictions apply to the use of these funds so not all students and schools benefit.

For example, Title I and IDEA funds cannot be used to pay for two teaching positions that will enable East Pennsboro to reduce class size. It will not provide for new computers in non-special education programs, or pay for new high school social studies and family consumer science books that we desperately need. Basic education funding covers these types of expenditures and enables school districts to meet obligations for general operating expenses.

As superintendents, we are used to answering to the public, the parents of the children we serve and the community at-large, and we should. And, so should our legislators. They need to answer to the 1.8 million children whose education funding is being cut.

What will legislators tell them is the reason they are no longer a budget priority? We urge our lawmakers not to cut the state appropriation for basic education, and to increase funding in keeping with the commitment made to all schools and students last year.

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