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COMMENTARY

Lawmakers should act and act fast

Education plan would give schools the help they need.

By Michael Nutter and Arlene Ackerman

Improving the quality of our schools is the most important economic development strategy for the future of Philadelphia.

Gov. Rendell has proposed a plan to give our local schools the resources they need by investing \$2.6 billion statewide over the next six years. For the School District of Philadelphia, this would mean a projected investment of \$638 million by 2014 with a 9.6 percent increase in state basic education funding in the first year.

For the sake of Philadelphia and our region, we are calling on the General Assembly to enact the governor's school-funding plan before lawmakers recess for the summer.

The governor's proposal is based on the principles of efficiency and accountability and would ensure that the bulk of new funding be used for programs that are proven to increase student achievement, such as smaller classes and expanding technical education in high schools.

We must act swiftly to save our region's most precious economic asset - our human capital. Philadelphia schools currently have a 45 percent dropout rate, and only 18 percent of the city's residents have bachelor's degrees.

New research commissioned by the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and conducted by the Center for Labor Market Studies shows that a Philadelphian who fails to earn a high school diploma can expect to earn about half the lifetime amount of someone who does, and about one quarter of the lifetime amount of someone with a bachelor's degree.

Despite Pennsylvania's near-bottom national ranking (46th of 50 states) for its share of school funding, and Philadelphia's current shortfall of \$4,600 per pupil, our local schools have demonstrated considerable progress.

Philadelphia's students have shown five years of academic growth as evidenced by a strong increase in state test scores. Furthermore, more schools are meeting academic targets under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

We must continue on this path of academic growth, but we cannot do it alone. The next step is for the legislature to turn the governor's school-funding plan into law as part of this year's budget.

Our offices have been working relentlessly to engage our local and state legislators on this issue.

On June 2 we held a joint news conference at City Hall, with business executives from the region, including Citizens Bank, Comcast Corp., Pennoni Associates, and United Parcel Service, who explained how the governor's proposal was vital for our region's economic competitiveness.

On June 10 in Harrisburg, we joined more than a dozen mayors and superintendents from urban and rural districts to show our solidarity for improving our school districts statewide.

Join us as we continue to work with business leaders, community advocates and concerned citizens across the region to reach out to our legislators and encourage them to support the governor's school-funding plan.

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