

Cost relief: It's time for the state to raise its stake in schools

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For too long, quality education in Pennsylvania has been overly dependent on local property taxes and ZIP codes.

The Legislature has a chance this month to start solving the problem by enacting Gov. Ed Rendell's public school funding formula, a six-year plan that would restore the state's share of support to levels it hasn't seen in a long time. State subsidies would take into account both the educational needs of a district and its ability to pay.

The plan has broad support -- not only from school boards and teachers, but also from pivotal groups like the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, the League of Women Voters and the AFL-CIO. And for good reason.

House Bill 2449 would bring stability to school funding by using a formula to determine how much each district should receive from the state. It would build on current funding and take into account the poverty level, millage rate, living costs and number of students learning English as a second language.

The goal is to start closing a funding gap that was identified by a study ordered by the Legislature and released in November. The 78-page report said Pennsylvania is spending \$4.8 billion less than necessary to educate its 1.8 million students so that they are proficient in reading and math by 2014. The costing-out study concluded that only 27 of the 501 districts were putting adequate resources into education, and the amounts spent varied widely.

The current proposal, which is on the agenda of the House Education Committee's meeting today, would not completely close the gap, but it would go a long way toward leveraging the share of resources the state used to commit.

School districts would receive at least 1.5 percent more dollars from Harrisburg than they did for this fiscal year. Twenty-eight of Allegheny County's 42 districts would get more, and it would mean a 4.3 percent increase for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Districts whose subsidy increases exceed a statewide inflationary index would have to spend most of it on state-sanctioned programs such as providing more instruction time or reducing class size.

Dollar figures are not in the legislation, but it will cost an additional \$291 million in the 2008-09 fiscal year budget, a 6 percent boost in basic K-12 spending to a total of \$5.2 billion. That increase is proportionately higher than in recent years, but it would reverse a trend that homeowners feel in their wallets -- since local property taxes are the source of 44 percent of

revenue for Pennsylvania's K-12 public schools. That is far higher than the national average of less than 29 percent, according to the Education Policy and Leadership Center in Harrisburg.

By contrast, the state covers only 35 percent of school costs, far below the national average of nearly 50 percent -- the funding threshold that Pennsylvania provided decades ago. This plan would bring state funding to 44 percent in six years.

The money for next year is included in Mr. Rendell's budget proposal, and projections by his budget office say natural growth in the state's economy will cover full implementation.

Money alone, however, won't deliver good education. It requires qualified and accountable teachers, children whose families send them ready to learn and classrooms with programs that get results. But Pennsylvania no longer can afford to fail children based on where they live, or to increase the local tax burden on their parents and neighbors to pay for their schools.

It's time for the Legislature to make state support for education the priority it once was in Pennsylvania. House Bill 2449 is their chance.