



Public schools get new start

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Pennsylvania's newly adopted budget is historic, nothing less than a new beginning for public education.

School boards, administrators and local taxpayers across Pennsylvania understandably are excited about the state's basic education increase of \$275 million this year, the largest in more than two decades. Even more so, they are excited about the state's commitment to increase that commitment annually through the 2013-2014 budget year. At that point, the state government will have achieved funding targets recommended by a "costing out" study in 2006. Those targets are meant to achieve the state's constitutional mandate to provide an "adequate" education for every child.

The costing-out study found wide disparities in per-student funding between affluent, mostly suburban districts and financially struggling urban and rural districts. Those differences are traceable to the state's over-reliance on local property taxation — with its inherently wide swings in property values — to fund education.

The increased funding is vastly different from money that districts will receive this summer in the first distribution of the state's cut from the new gambling industry. That money and future revenue from that source will be used, dollar for dollar, to reduce property tax rates everywhere and possibly, wage tax rates in the Scranton School District.

By contrast, the budget money is additional revenue for the districts, and will be distributed based on actual student enrollments and in accordance with the district-by-district findings of the costing-out study.

Fairer school funding that diminishes the distinction between the haves and have-nots long has been an elusive goal, towards which the new budget and long-term commitment take enormous strides.

Opponents of the new funding formula contend that the notion of an "adequate" education has been converted to a notion that funding is the only issue. In the costing-out debate, they argued that increased funding doesn't guarantee any improvement.

They have a point. The objective is not just funding, but consistently higher achievement. So the new state money comes not as a gift but as a challenge. Local boards of education and school administrators now must ensure that the infusion produces the desired result — compliance with state achievement standards by 2014.

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