

Lawmakers must help schools now

Please don't allow a great opportunity to boost funding to get mired in politics.

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The York City School Board is gambling on politics.

Board members are betting that the Legislature will approve Gov. Ed Rendell's budget proposal that calls for about \$5 million in new state funding for the district. If that comes through, then the board's no-tax-hike budget will be fine.

If not . . .

Well, let's just hope it does. Beleaguered city taxpayers certainly need the break. As a group, they're the poorest in the county paying some of the highest millage rates.

Other area school districts are also no doubt hoping the education proposal passes during the upcoming state budget process.

The governor's proposal contains a significant boost in state funding for districts -- \$2.6 billion over six years statewide. York County districts would see increases next year ranging from 1.76 percent to 15.75 percent. The governor's plan calls for a boost of \$130 million in state education dollars for York County by 2014.

This is a much-needed effort to get the state closer to covering half the cost of public schools -- a benchmark in most other states that our lawmakers have allowed to sink to about a third. Pennsylvania is 44th in the nation in state funding for education, according to Dallastown Area School District Supt. Stewart Weinberg.

More importantly, the governor's proposal calls for instituting a school subsidy formula that would use hard data to determine funding levels: actual student population, number of special-ed students, number of district residents living in poverty, etc.

This is excellent news because it's a step away from the backroom politics method of determining district subsidies. The current method of setting state funding levels has hurt growing school districts like the many we have in York County.

Will the city school board's gamble pay off? We hope so, but it's hardly a sure bet.

Some York County lawmakers are saying they like the idea of setting a school funding formula. And they favor bringing more state funding to our community's districts.

But they're also concerned that an outsized chunk of state aid will go to Philadelphia. That's an age-old concern among local pols. It's easy to blame Philly and Pittsburgh for our fiscal problems -- and there's some truth to the complaint that a lot of York County tax dollars go to those urban areas.

But we just hope those concerns don't harden into political sclerosis.

We desperately need the state to assume a large share of the school bill. We need a fair funding method that's predictable and based on real data. We need something that will come closer to solving the school funding problem -- something more than just using slot machine revenue to lower property tax bills.

A quick look at that situation shows it results in tax bills dancing the political hokey-pokey:

--- In South Eastern, qualified homeowners get \$158 in tax relief from the slot revenue. But for the average homeowner in the district, \$99.86 will be taken by a tax increase. So they only come out about \$58 ahead -- after four straight years of sometimes hefty tax hikes.

--- In Dallastown, state figures indicated gambling revenue was supposed to provide \$133 in tax relief per homeowner, but the district increased taxes by \$151 for the average homeowner, resulting in a \$17 tax hike (Supt. Weinberg said that \$133 will likely shrink further, resulting in larger tax hikes because new homesteads have been added to the tax relief rolls).

Using that slot revenue to reduce property taxes is nice. But it's not a long-term solution. That must come from a commitment by the state to properly fund schools -- and a fair formula moving forward.

It's the only truly safe bet.