



State needs school-funding formula

Quibble over how much to spend, but at least allocate it fairly.

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How many times have you heard someone complain that the state used to provide about half the funding for our public schools but now only provides about a third -- resulting in mountainous local property taxes?

Talk to area lawmakers about the issue, and they'll agree that school funding is a major problem. There have been several attempts to "fix" it over the years, none very successful -- though the property tax reductions enabled by slot machine revenue are scheduled to kick in this year.

Lawmakers blame part of our property tax problems on a state subsidy formula that has been frozen since the early '90s -- a system that punishes the many growing school districts in our community.

Actually, though, calling it a "formula" or a "system" is far too generous. It's more like a free-for-all. Legislative leaders gather at budget time in a formerly smoke-filled-room and trade horses with each other and the governor. Some years the result is good for school districts, other years not.

Rarely, though, are the figures based on actual need. How many students does a district have to educate? How many are in special education? How many are in poverty and in need of remedial tutoring?

Well, it's time the state doled out that money using a quantifiable formula. Pennsylvania and Illinois are the only two states without such a system.

As part of his budget proposal this year, Gov. Ed Rendell put a pretty decent formula on the table. It would allocate money based on identifiable needs. And it would represent a major investment in our school systems -- an additional \$2.6 billion in state aid over six years. According to the administration, the plan would result in nearly \$130 million in total benefits to York County by 2014.

No doubt that would move the state share of school funding closer to the 50 percent figure -- and it would be fairer, too, as state taxes are based more on ability to pay than is the local property tax, which hurts fixed-income seniors.

As you would expect, there are debates over the details in the governor's ed spending plan:

--- "Ed spending is right -- literally," say some, poking the Democratic governor for seeking billions in new funding.

The funding increase numbers are based on a costing-out study sponsored by Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, which said the state is underspending on schools by a whopping \$4 billion. Even Rep. Mackereth was shocked and skeptical of the figures in the study.

It's fair game to debate the overall figure, as long as we can agree that the state should be paying a bigger share and that it ought to be divvied up systematically rather than politically.

--- Another sticking point: The strings the state would attach to new funding for districts. Subsidy increases above a certain point would have to go to state-approved programs designed to improve student achievement on test scores.

School officials don't like that. They say they're in the best position to decide where state funding could be best used, not state bureaucrats.

Maybe, but the governor rightly worries that new funding will just disappear into generous new teacher contracts, without any corresponding impact on student achievement.

Perhaps there's some compromise to be reached where schools that have strong test scores are exempted from such strings.

The bottom line, though, is that it's time for a formula, and if it doesn't get passed this year, as the governor migrates into lame-duck-hood, it might not get done for a long time -- if ever.