

The Bulletin

Philadelphia's Family Newspaper

Inside Today's Bulletin

'It's Time For A Real Funding Formula'

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03/27/2008

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Philadelphia - Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak spoke to the state House of Representatives Committee on Education yesterday about sweeping changes he wants made to the state's school funding formula.

The plan resulted from the state Board of Education's "Costing-Out Study", commissioned by Act 114 of 2006. The study determined that out of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts, 465 were inadequately funded. It posited there exists a statewide funding shortfall of over \$4 billion.

Mr. Zahorchak's remedy to the reported shortfall would entail three measures: His department would first determine the funding increase each district requires to achieve optimum value for its students by considering such factors as the district's size and its number of foreign-born students in need of English-language instruction.

The agency would then calculate the extent to which the commonwealth should fund the increase - a contentious topic due to state residents' unhappiness with high property taxes.

Districts eligible for the greatest assistance would be those with the highest school tax burdens and the lowest levels of wealth. Some of the districts in the region standing to benefit the most should the proposal win lawmakers' approval include Philadelphia, Avon Grove, Norristown, Upper Darby and Bristol Township.

State officials would then work to ensure that most of the commonwealth taxpayer funds they provide to districts are spent on such priorities as increased classroom time, teacher training, more rigorous course offerings and class-size reduction.

"It's time, I believe, for a real funding formula," Mr. Zahorchak said. "It is a fair formula."

Legislators on the Education Committee were nearly universal in their praise of the cabinet head, noting that under his watch Pennsylvania's overall student scores on standardized testing have risen. But sentiments expressed by some members underscored the difficulty of developing a consensus on education funding.

Rep. Mark Longietti (D-Mercer) noted that 88 percent of students in his own Farrell Area School

District qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches and yet the district stands to gain only about a 1.5 percent increase in state funding from the proposed formula. Reps. Jess Stairs (R-Westmoreland) and Chelsa Wagner (D-Allegheny) voiced similar concerns that some districts that are not well-off financially would only receive meager increases.

Rep. Karen Beyer (R-Lehigh) praised much of Mr. Zahorchak's work but encouraged him to work toward educational cost-savings through district consolidation. Mrs. Beyer noted she represents several small school districts she believes should be unified, to save on administrative expenses.

"It really lacks common sense in many ways, I think, for [these districts] to continue to be separate," she said.

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