

Budget cutting should not shortchange schools

June 22, 2008 08:40 am

— In economic terms, a spending increase can sometimes be a spending decrease. That is because as the cost of doing business rises, more money is needed just to stay even.

Raising taxes to keep pace with inflation is a hard concept to grasp, and a harder one for some taxpayers to swallow, but it is a fact of life.

Barring some unexpected increase in efficiency, if public spending does not increase, public services decrease.

In slower economic times, accepting a few more pot holes or scruffier parks may be an option. Those things can be fixed later during the inevitable upturn.

But accepting holes in the education system is not an option. The damage done to young people's lives cannot be fixed later. Boom times are even harder to come by if people do not have the knowledge, training and skills to take advantage of them.

As Pennsylvania struggles to make up for expected budget shortfalls, education funding is on the chopping block.

When more and more is being asked of schools, and when more and more is being asked of local taxpayers, the state should be expected to help bridge the gap.

But that is not what will happen if the Republican majority in the state Senate gets its way.

Sure, it has proposed a 3.5 percent increase in spending, but inflation is running at 4.2 percent. That means the GOP plan would cut half a percent of real dollars from school's budgets. The school boards, since they can not lay off students, will probably raise real estate taxes, an unfair option.

Does the state need a 6 percent increase in education spending as proposed by Gov. Rendell? Probably not in this economic climate. But education at least needs to be able to tread water while waiting for an upturn.

If the GOP majority cannot find a way for education spending to keep pace with inflation, education quality will experience deflation -- and that is something neither party, nor the state's children, can afford.