

## Group says schools need cash

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A room of educators, school board members and other officials from Greene County's school districts came together on Wednesday evening to make their plea to state Rep. H. William DeWeese to take their message to Harrisburg. That message was one of educational equity for all children in the commonwealth.

"One of the things near and dear to my heart is equity for all students, and I can't understand how students in some districts get \$7,000 spent on them, while those in others get \$17,000," said Jerome Bartley superintendent of the Central Greene School District. "There needs to be a way for it to be equitable and fair regardless of their zip codes."

Sandy Zelno of the Education Law Center spoke to the group about a costing-out study conducted in 2006-07. The group conducting the study was charged with addressing issues of adequacy and equity among school districts across the state.

The firm of Augenblick, Palaich and Associates presented its report to the State Board of Education in November 2007, and a revised edition in December 2007.

What the study found was that Pennsylvania is severely lacking in its educational system, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

"There is no equity. Pennsylvania is one of the worst school funding systems in the country," Zelno said. "The monies have come, but not necessarily where they were needed most. We are 28th in funding per student in Pennsylvania."

Zelno said that the statistics in the report show that there is a \$4.38 billion shortfall to meet the standards set forth for school districts by the 2013-14 school year.

"We are a system that is overly dependent on property taxes. The system is broken," Zelno said. "We attempted to take it to court and they told us that we had to show how the system had harmed at least one child and that we had not proven that. Now we have the document to prove that we have."

Zelno told the group that another \$50 million would need to be added to the current \$291 million proposed to bring the districts into compliance with the adequacy levels set for six years from now.

A piece of information that came out of the review of the costing-out study is that current figures did not take into account special needs or gifted students.

The educators in attendance found this to be unacceptable, especially districts like West Greene, where business manager Valerie Caprini informed the panel that one-third of her student body are in the special education program.

"There is a big discrepancy," Caprini said. "We don't have a large business base. What equitable funding would mean to us is the ability to maintain professional development for our teachers, to

recruit effective and competent teachers and administrators."

Caprini said that with the No Child Left Behind legislation, there is no funding attached to the process unless a district gets into trouble.

Donna Furnier, superintendent of the Jefferson-Morgan School District, participated in the costing-out study and said that the study looked at several different models to determine the statistics.

"It was based on successful schools, evidence-based and on input from a professional judgment panel," Furnier said. "We were grouped with districts that are similar to ours, and things were looked at like class sizes, services, technology, food and warmth in the home, and services with a focus on fiscal responsibility."

DeWeese said he feels a bill before the Senate has an uphill battle among Senate Republicans, but that he felt the House Republicans would be much more receptive to legislation if it gets to that point.

A reference to the last time that a "fiscally sound and equitable" system of educational funding existed in Pennsylvania was said to have been in 1990-91 during the administration of Gov. Robert Casey.

"Casey was willing to take the hit and raise the state income tax. It was just by a couple of tenths of a point," DeWeese said. "But that \$40 to \$50 that it cost taxpayers, when you multiplied that by the number of Pennsylvanians, did a tremendous amount. He was very foresighted in his thinking."

"If this is what came out of the PA state funding campaign, then it is totally unacceptable," said Greg Niverth, a Jefferson-Morgan School Board member. "Food costs are up, gas is up, health care, power is going to increase and on and on. We cannot continue to run J.M. under the current system. In two years, we will have eaten up the money given to J.M."

It was pointed out that no business could be fiscally responsible if they did not have a budget in place and yet that is what Pennsylvania schools are asked to do each year as they wait to hear how much money they will be allotted.

Niverth said that the disparity across the state, especially in light of \$85 million or 32 percent of the budget given to the Philadelphia school system, is unacceptable.

"In the 1972-73 school year, 70 percent of the funding for districts was from the state and 30 percent from the school districts. In 2005-06, those percentages flip-flopped," Niverth said. "That is not acceptable, and I personally will not vote to raise property taxes in my district by one single penny more."

Niverth raised the issue for the consideration of a joint school district in the county to somehow overcome the shortfall that Greene County schools continually face.

"I will go on record again and again, we need to consolidate," said DeWeese. "I am going to do everything that I can to pursue the equity goal. When your organization goes out there and develops a forum like this to discuss education reform, this is wonderful."