

Give more to neediest schools

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As the state budget deadline looms in Harrisburg, time is ticking on Gov. Rendell's plan to overhaul school funding. Despite opposition by many state lawmakers, a study released last week indicates why Rendell's plan is a good investment.

Rendell wants to increase funding for public schools by 6 percent beyond the nearly \$5 billion spent now. Much of the \$291 million increase would go to the state's poorest school districts.

The boost in funding would be based on a formula that gives more money to the neediest districts - those with the largest number of children living in poverty. New Jersey began using a similar approach this year, arguing that it costs more to educate students with special needs.

Under Rendell's proposal, Philadelphia would receive an increase of 9.6 percent, or \$86 million more. But even wealthy school districts would see an increase of 1.5 percent.

Rendell's funding formula is based on the "costing-out study" commissioned by state lawmakers last year that concluded Pennsylvania schools are underfunded by \$4.38 billion. To close the gap, Rendell proposes annual school-funding increases until he leaves office in 2011.

As expected, Rendell's plan isn't going over too well with many lawmakers, who argue that money alone isn't the key to improving education. Lawmakers caution against increased state spending as the economy slows, leading to less tax revenues.

But a new study underscores why increasing funding for schools is a good long-term investment.

The study - titled "The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education" - by a professor at Penn State and another at Cumberland University said the current funding plan is inadequate and not equitable.

The study found that high school dropouts are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and three times more likely to receive welfare.

A better education leads to reduced crime, the study found. Not surprisingly, while 18 percent of the adult population doesn't have a high school diploma, 41 percent of the prison inmates lack a high school degree.

While it costs \$32,000 a year to house a prison inmate, the costing-out study said the average cost to provide an adequate education is just under \$12,000.

So the taxpayers can pay now for better education or later to house prisoners. That's just one more reason why increasing education spending is a good long-term investment for everyone.

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