



Budget creates historic chance

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Pennsylvania's Legislature has a chance to make history this year by taking a huge stride toward equitable education funding.

The state government provides only 36 percent of education funding, one of the lowest levels of any state. That creates vast inequities in funding among districts in affluent and poor areas because poor areas cannot extract the difference from the local tax base. Statewide, the range of per-pupil spending is from about \$8,500 to over \$21,000.

But the impact goes beyond education. When districts consume the vast majority of local tax money to make up for the state shortfall, they hamper the ability of municipal governments to fund themselves and, therefore, to provide crucial services.

Pennsylvania's constitution was rewritten in 1968. It removed a requirement that the state provide 50 percent of all education funding. Not surprisingly, the state contribution immediately began to slide. The last gubernatorial administration under which the state provided 50 percent was that of Milton Shapp, the first governor to take office after the 1968 constitutional convention.

Since then, the state education budget has been a yearly political exercise rather than a cohesive policy strategy. The education budget proposed this year by Gov. Ed Rendell would change that. Over the next six fiscal years, it systematically would increase state education funding by \$2.6 billion, raising the state contribution from 36 percent to about 44 percent. (A chart below details the impact on regional school districts.) The distribution would be weighted toward poorer districts, which would help to mitigate the vast funding disparities, but even the most affluent districts would receive 1.5 percent increases.

The budget is in response to the "costing-out" study commissioned by the Legislature, which last year concluded that Pennsylvania public schools are underfunded by about \$4 billion. That study isn't perfect. And it's perfectly legitimate to debate specific numbers. And, yes, money is not the only factor in quality education. But it is preposterous to believe that it makes no difference. And the access of a public school district to adequate funding must no longer be a function primarily of its ZIP code.

The budget proposal foresees funding the increases at the state level through the state government's anticipated revenue growth over the six years, so that no general tax increase would be required.

This proposal would be good for schools, other governments and for the entire economy. Lawmakers should pass it and make history.