

Williamsport Sun-Gazette

Proposal would aid schools

But lawmakers say numbers based on 'flawed' study

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He is backed by a statewide coalition of education advocates, who say the governor's proposal is a strong first step toward better education funding, but he needs to convince the state Legislature to support his budget proposal for those funding levels to become reality.

A recent study commissioned by the state Legislature and governor showed Pennsylvania is underfunding public education by more than \$4 billion, or an average of \$2,414 per pupil. The study also determined — for the first time ever — a Pennsylvania-specific per-pupil dollar target for achieving adequate funding levels in each of its 501 school districts.

Representing the Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign locally, Dr. Kathleen R. Kelley, president of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and Williamsport Area School District superintendent, said many school officials already deal with the reality of not having enough dollars to go around.

"This (study) just put it in black and white for us," Kelley said.

But while advocates are pointing to the study as evidence of underfunding, some lawmakers say the study is flawed, including state Rep. Matthew E. Baker, R-Wellsboro.

Baker said he has "some problems, quite frankly, with the study."

For example, Baker pointed to the study's method for determining housing costs and local tax bases. Those figures, he said, were based on "two-bedroom rentals."

"For rural people ... the majority of the people live in homes," Baker said, adding that is just one of several flaws in the study that directly affects central Pennsylvania residents.

Taxation at the local level

Also representing the campaign, Charles Peterson, president-elect of the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials and business manager of the Williamsport district, said the state's property tax relief law imposes limitations on school districts that tie their ability to raise taxes beyond certain limits.

Desires to raise taxes beyond the set limit requires voter approval through a ballot referendum.

Further hampering the ability of many districts to raise revenues, according to Kelley, is an eroding tax base.

While school administrators contend their taxable base is decreasing, Kelley also said "demands are increasing every year with unfunded mandates."

Those demands — No Child Left Behind, Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests and the proposed graduation competency exams are a few — cannot be taken lightly, as not achieving has serious consequences, Kelley said.

With the demands and limited financial resources, Kelley said many districts cut extra-curriculars and supplemental programs, such as the arts and music.

"We don't want to make cuts, but the testing is the priority," Kelley said.

State Rep. Garth Everett, R-Muncy, said he believes educators' greater concern is unfunded mandates, and that's where change should begin rather than with developing a new funding mechanism.

"I think that the superintendents and boards just don't want any more unfunded mandates and just want us to look at unfunded mandates and repeal some," Everett said.

Everett described the current school funding means as "fair enough right now."

"Anytime you start thinking with that kind of funding formula (as proposed in the costing out study), there's going to be winners and losers, and I think the districts in our area might not come out as well as they come out right now," Everett said.

Meanwhile, districts also are looking for ways to increase technology offerings.

The new technologies many students use outside of the classroom for recreation can make learning fun and exciting and increase students' interest, thus increasing their knowledge base and academic performance, Kelley and Peterson said.

"I think it's important that we find a way that it can all become a more digital learning experience for kids," Pamela J. Markle said.

As a member of the Williamsport Area School board and president-elect of the state School Boards Association, Markle knows first-hand the difficulties in preparing a school district budget, while trying to balance the needs of the district and taxpayer limitations.

Everett said that as legislators, their job "is to make sure every student in Pennsylvania gets an adequate education and provide the funding for that."

Everett said the study proposes "the dream figure" that would provide "perfectly funded" districts in a "dream world for perfect education," but said that no entity is ever funded perfectly and it's not possible to fund everyone at their desired levels.

The next step

Markle said not only does the state need to up its role in school funding, but districts also need to remember they bear responsibility and should be selective in what money they spend and prioritize needs.

But the study's findings cannot be ignored, Markle said, noting the study's credibility in that it was conducted by an independent firm.

"It did give us an objective look at what it's going to take, in terms of money and programming, to help all the schools for all the kids," Markle said.

The campaign supports the governor's proposal as "a step in the right direction," Kelley said, noting areas to be built upon to develop a more equitable school funding formula.

The Legislature "asked for the study. They got the results," Kelley said. "Now they have to enact a formula that's more equitable for all schools."

Baker said there's "a long way to go before any of this actually becomes public policy or law."

Baker also said if districts want to reach the \$4 billion threshold from the study, the governor's proposed \$2.6 billion still leaves a gap. The governor's proposal also doesn't address special education, Baker said, a point the campaign specified it wants addressed.

Baker notes a resolution passed in the House that proposes to create "a joint commission to develop at least two different formulas for the Legislature to consider and/or approve."

The resolution is awaiting consideration from the Senate, he said.

For more information, visit www.pde.state.pa.us, www.paschoolfunding.org, www.budget.state.pa.us or www.psea.org.

Fact Box

Study's key findings

- Pennsylvania is under-funding public education by more than \$4 billion, or an average of \$2,414 per pupil
 - The statewide costing out estimate to reach 100 percent student proficiency and other performance expectations is \$21.63 billion.
 - About two thirds of the \$21.63 billion total cost is associated with the base cost of educating an average student in the state. This base cost does not include food service costs, transportation costs, costs associated with community services, adult education, capital costs or debt service costs. About 12.6 percent is associated with the added costs of special education, about 9.4 percent of the total is associated with the added cost of serving students from high poverty homes, about 2.7 percent is associated with the added cost of serving English language learners, about 3.9 percent is associated with district size, and about 3.4 percent of the total cost is associated with regional cost of living differences.
 - The average total costing out estimate per student is \$11,926. By comparison, in 2005-06 school districts in Pennsylvania actually spent \$9,512 per student; the base cost per student identified by the study is \$8,003.
 - These figures are based on 2005-06 spending.
- Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education
Gov. Ed Rendell, in his 2008-09 basic education budget proposal, calls for the state to commit at least \$2.6 billion in additional funds to schools over the next six years.