

Developing a Sensible Approach to Funding Our Schools

Pennsylvania has an economic, moral and constitutional imperative to ensure that every student has an opportunity to learn in a safe and healthy environment, with access to good curriculum and high standards for educational quality.

The way we fund schools should be based on community values and rational principles. What do we want our children to learn? What is required for economic competitiveness and strong communities? What makes Pennsylvania a good place to raise a family? What is fair and fiscally responsible? What is legal, ethical and Constitutional?

We need to start with what we want our students to learn

The calculation for setting up a baseline funding level must be based on the real costs of sufficiently providing the programs and experiences that students need to meet any standards that are set.

If we say they need to reach a certain level of educational attainment in any subject, it is our duty to ensure that each child is provided with the actual materials, instruction, support and time necessary to learn it. Furthermore, the real world recognizes that different students have different educational needs so our funding approach needs to recognize that too.

A funding structure must be fiscally responsible

A good formula provides stability to both students and communities. It should allow us to manage our educational priorities in ways that are stable, long term and that control costs without shortchanging children or communities.

That means it must: be predictable, accurate (use updated data), provide accountability and transparency mechanisms; it must address issues of equity and the fact that Pennsylvania has a variety of communities in both size and type. Furthermore, Pennsylvania must reduce the reliance on property taxes which unfairly pressures and harms community health and economic development as well as disproportionately burdens communities that have less ability to generate property tax revenue. The state must implement a schedule to increase the state share of support for education.

What we do must meet our Constitutional, legal and ethical responsibilities

Any distribution formula must meet the Constitutional obligation to provide a "thorough and efficient" education, and represent an equitable approach to allocating funds. It must also reduce the influence of politics on school funding.

The Pennsylvania Constitution states that the state's responsibility is to "provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth." In fact, it is the only service mandated by the Constitution.

Our legislature should develop, implement and adhere to "an objective formula to distribute resources in a manner that is internally uniform and consistent for all school districts, rather than using selective political influences and favors for some districts including hold-harmless spending, minimum increases, multiple formulas aimed at specific districts, and new line items added for public relations purposes." (Education Law Center "10 criteria for Evaluating K-12 Education Funding in PA").

Pennsylvania must move toward a rational, sustainable funding structure. This will eliminate the use (or misuse) of power and political struggles; be fair to communities large and small and most importantly, give every student an opportunity to learn.