

# Education funding is everyone's concern

by Jane Wilshusen  
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Several years ago I learned that because education funding depended heavily on property taxes, children who lived in "poorer" districts often did not receive the same quality of education as those from "wealthier" districts. That just didn't seem right to me.

I wanted to learn more and get involved, so I joined a public education study group. As a member of Presbyterian Citizens in Action, a faith-based advocacy group, we met monthly to learn about the school funding system and about ways to improve quality, equity in funding, accountability and other important ingredients of a sound system.

Some of us visited legislators. Several of us attended education committee hearings and wrote letters to our legislators.

Last July the state legislature voted to give schools what they really need to help their students succeed -- a dramatic boost in resources and an equitable funding formula for the first time in nearly 20 years.

The new funding formula resulted from the state's "Costing-Out Study," commissioned by the General Assembly in 2006 to determine the true costs for all of our students to attain state academic standards.

When the "Costing-Out" report was presented to the state Board of Education a year later in November 2007, we learned the commonwealth was woefully underfunding public education and that the vast majority of school districts had funding adequacy gaps -- meaning most school districts didn't have enough resources to assure that all of their students could meet academic expectations.

We owe gratitude to our area legislators who fought to make this increase in basic education a reality.

Pennsylvania is making progress to ensure that students in poorer districts have access to some of the same resources as children in wealthier districts -- such as tutoring, technology and early childhood programs.

Now, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- the stimulus law -- Pennsylvania will receive \$2.6 billion in new federal money to be earmarked for pre-K-12 education and higher education during the next two years. Gov. Rendell announced recently that he'd use \$418 million of stimulus money for basic education in the 2009-10 budget year so that school districts can continue to make progress to close their funding adequacy gaps.

However, some leaders in the General Assembly have warned school districts not to count on this funding. This seems odd.

Why would the General Assembly not use a pot of federal money available that must be used for basic education when we still need to improve and increase the resources provided to school districts?

The General Assembly must make \$418 million available for basic education. Providing such an increase and using the formula to distribute the funds will hopefully help school districts avoid local property tax increases. But school districts need to start planning their budgets for next year now. That means they need confidence that the General Assembly will use the federal stimulus funds targeted for education to help fund basic education here in PA.

In these difficult economic times, it is more important than ever to protect (and nurture) the progress achieved in education funding reform. The progress that was made last year must not fall on the chopping block of hard economic times. We must ensure that education remains a priority in Pennsylvania.

If we want districts to keep property taxes down, there's a huge pot of money earmarked for basic education. Don't hold it hostage. Perhaps even more importantly, let's continue to build on the success of last year's budget when the General Assembly voted to boost basic education in a way that would make a difference to school children everywhere.

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