

Stimulus cash no substitute for Pennsylvania education funds

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Many elements of the ongoing state budget impasse raise the question of whether the politicians behind it are negotiating in good faith. One area in particular demonstrates that the fight is more about scoring political points than establishing good public policy.

A principal cause of the impasse is education funding. The Rendell administration and its Democratic allies in the Legislature want to maintain a six-year systemic increase in state education funding that began just last year. Gov. Ed Rendell has made that one of a few requirements he has to affix his signature to a budget.

Legislative Republicans, particularly many in the Senate majority, want to cut education spending by nearly \$800 million and replace it with a like amount that the state government will receive for education from the federal stimulus bill.

That's a bad idea for students and taxpayers.

First, it would stall substantial progress in education that has been documented over the last several years, as the state has increased specialized and general educational spending. Improved education is vital to Pennsylvania's long-term economic prospects.

And use of the federal money to fill budget holes, rather than to fund educational improvements, would not resolve anything. It would substitute temporary one-time funding for ongoing, systemic state contributions to local education budgets. When the federal funding ends, the education budget still will be left with the nearly \$800 million hole, which then could be filled only one of three ways: increased state taxes; increased local property taxes; or a combination of both.

A budget deal should begin with an agreement to maintain the momentum for educational improvement. Doing so would relieve mounting pressure on local property taxes - especially since local taxpayers statewide likely will be stuck with covering the costs of borrowing that has been undertaken by districts to cover the absence of state funding.

Some lawmakers have taken the economic crisis as an opportunity to un-ring a bell, to reverse the funding priorities of the last decade in the name of economic necessity. Doing so on education would be a long-term, tragic mistake.