



State of Pennsylvania's schools a hot topic

Lancaster Intelligencer

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Martha Harris' daughter was born with a life-threatening condition called non-immune hydrops.

But Kathryn Harris beat the odds and is preparing to attend college, despite the learning difficulties, vision impairments and other physical and emotional disabilities related to her condition.

It wasn't easy.

Harris enrolled her daughter in the private Janus School, where she received specialized services and instruction. Harris also hired private therapists and counselors and devoted countless hours of her time to helping Kathryn.

"We're one of the lucky ones because we've been able to financially support her education," Harris told a roomful of school officials, lawmakers and education advocates gathered recently in Lancaster.

Reflecting on her experiences, Harris urged the audience to support House Bill 704, which would change the state's current special-education funding formula -- which assumes 16 percent of all students need special services -- to one based on each school district's individual needs.

"It will create a more equitable funding system so that where the greatest needs are, the greatest resources can be applied so more children in Pennsylvania can benefit from the one-on-one services our daughter's been able to benefit from," Harris said.

Her comments came at a legislative breakfast and panel discussion on the state of Pennsylvania's schools sponsored by Good Schools Pennsylvania. Held at St. Andrew United Church of Christ, the event drew about 200 education advocates, school officials and state lawmakers.

In addition to special-education funding, participants discussed property tax reform, the unique needs of urban school systems and the growth in specialized services schools now provide to students.

A major focus was the new formula the state adopted in 2008-09 for distributing basic education funding to schools.

The formula is based on a "costing-out" study that found a \$4.4 billion gap in the amount schools should be spending to adequately educate all students.

Last year, School District of Lancaster got an additional \$5 million under the formula, SDL superintendent Pedro Rivera said.

Much of that money was used to expand tutoring and after-school enrichment programs, he said.

"We saw this as an opportunity to keep kids with us longer and to really push math, reading and enrichment activities," Rivera said.

The additional money also helped the district meet the needs of its English language learners, said Persida Himmele, a Millersville University education professor and SDL's former ELL coordinator.

About 23 percent of all SDL students are non-native English speakers, she said. To meet their needs, the district must employ 65 ELL teachers at its elementary and middle schools.

The costing-out study, which factored in the additional cost of ELL services to determine each district's "adequacy gap," has been "revolutionary in terms of leveling out the playing field ... for English language learners," Himmele said.

The costing-out study also considered each school district's special-education costs. But that data was not applied to the special-education funding formula, something House Bill 704 would change.

While the panelists agreed the state should pay more for special-ed services in districts with the highest needs, they acknowledged that economic realities may make state funding increases a tough sell.

Pennsylvania is facing a projected \$5 billion deficit next year, lawmakers said.

"The reason the budget ran so long this year was because we were fighting over whether or not we were going to fund education," state Rep. Mike Sturla, a Lancaster city Democrat, said. "Now imagine how long the next one's going to take."

Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray said funding equity won't be possible until Pennsylvania changes the current system, which relies primarily on local property taxes.

"It's counterintuitive because if you let a property go, if you let it decline when reassessment comes around, you'll actually pay less taxes," he said.

Cities "have hit the wall" in their ability to raise taxes and provide essential services, and the suburbs aren't far behind, Gray said.

"Communities ... not too many years down the road will run out of shopping centers and developments they can build and will be in the same boat we're in," he said.

"They won't be able to expand themselves out of the property tax conundrum."

Republican state Rep. John Bear predicted that the state budget deficit, expiring federal stimulus funds and other economic factors will prompt changes to the state's tax system by 2011-12.

"We're going to have enough political will and push from the public to say, 'Hey, we've got to look at how we tax everything in Pennsylvania -- businesses, people, property, all that -- and come up with something that works better,'" he said.

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