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School funding issues remain. Study: Special-ed money not adequate

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Special-education funding disparities

2006-07 figures

School district	Number of special education pupils	Actual* spending per pupil	Required* spending per pupil	Shortfall per pupil	Total shortfall
Cocalico	552	\$7,697	\$10,870	\$3,173	\$1,751,496
Columbia	330	\$8,032	\$11,189	\$3,157	\$1,041,810
Conestoga Valley	506	\$8,666	\$10,942	\$2,276	\$1,151,656
Donegal	462	\$7,620	\$10,551	\$2,931	\$1,354,122
Elanco	416	\$6,730	\$10,786	\$4,056	\$1,687,296
Elizabethtown	525	\$7,004	\$11,116	\$4,112	\$2,158,800
Ephrata	565	\$8,226	\$11,183	\$2,957	\$1,670,705
Hempfield	1,138	\$7,067	\$10,677	\$3,610	\$4,108,180
Lampeter-Strasburg	479	\$7,350	\$10,405	\$3,055	\$1,463,345
SDL	2,215	\$7,476	\$11,744	\$4,268	\$9,453,620
Manheim Central	498	\$7,698	\$10,854	\$3,156	\$1,571,688
Manheim Township	594	\$8,258	\$10,861	\$2,603	\$1,546,182
Penn Manor	823	\$6,047	\$10,846	\$4,799	\$3,949,577
Pequea Valley	281	\$7,284	\$10,675	\$3,391	\$952,871
Solanco	456	\$8,113	\$10,339	\$2,226	\$1,015,056
Warwick	780	\$8,192	\$10,713	\$2,521	\$1,966,380
Totals/averages	10,620	\$7,591	\$10,859	\$3,268	\$36,842,784

* Amount spent or required for special education services on top of regular education costs.

Source: "Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pa.'s Education Goals for Students with Disabilities"

Dan Morris / Intelligencer Journal

Correction — Pennsylvania's new formula for basic education subsidies for public schools is designed to bridge a funding gap of about \$2.6 billion over six years. The incorrect figure was included in the article below, posted on LancasterOnline Wednesday.

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School districts in Lancaster County are spending about \$3,200 less per pupil, on average, than they should on special-education services, according to a statewide study of expenditures for students with disabilities.

The study, by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, concluded that 391 school districts in Pennsylvania are falling short on special education funding by a total of \$380 million.

In Lancaster County, the gap is nearly \$37 million, the study found.

Advocates for the disabled said the study points up the need for reforms in the way the state funds special-education services.

The analysis was conducted by the same consultants that completed the 2007 "costing-out" study that prompted the state Legislature to adopt a new formula for distributing basic education subsidies to schools.

Under the new formula, basic education funding increased by \$275 million this year and is projected to increase by \$300 million in Gov. Ed. Rendell's 2009-10 budget.

But the formula doesn't apply to special-education subsidies, which have increased by much smaller amounts — 1.3 percent to 2.7 percent — in recent years. And for 2009-10, Rendell has proposed no increase in special-ed funding.

School district officials say the stagnant funding has forced them to pay a larger share of the rapidly rising cost of mandated special-ed services with property tax revenue.

In Eastern Lancaster County School District, for example, special-education expenses rose by 42 percent — nearly \$400,000 — from 2007-08 to 2008-09, according to Keith Ramsey, director of finance and operations.

In many districts, more students are being diagnosed with autism and other disabilities that require specialized services than in years past, school officials said.

Schools now provide a wide range of aides and specialists to assist students, including physical and occupational therapists, behavior specialists and autistic support specialists, said Monica Steward, director of special education for Elizabethtown Area School District.

They've also adopted new — and expensive — technology to help students with disabilities learn.

School districts also must pay for tuition, transportation and support services at private schools for pupils with severe disabilities.

Conestoga Valley School District is paying private school tuition ranging from \$18,000 to \$60,000 a year for four students, CV superintendent Gerald Huesken said.

In comparison, CV spends about \$13,000 per year, on average, to educate students in its schools.

"As special education costs grow in this tight economy, local school districts may not be able to provide the traditional level of services without other programs suffering," Huesken said.

While expenditures have increased, they still aren't enough to meet all students' needs at many schools, according to the study.

School districts in Lancaster County spent an average of \$7,591 per pupil in 2006-07 for special-education services on top of the \$8,300 average per-pupil expenditure for regular education services, the study found.

Those numbers do not include the cost of transportation, food service or building expenses.

To adequately meet the needs of special-education students, the districts should be spending nearly \$11,000 per pupil, on average, above the cost of regular education services, the study found.

The funding gaps range from a low of \$2,276 per pupil in Conestoga Valley School District to a high of \$4,799 in Penn Manor. The average shortfall is \$3,268.

The findings are similar to those of the 2007 costing-out study, which determined that county schools should be spending \$3,347 per pupil more to meet overall academic expectations for all students.

The state Legislature used that study as the basis for its new funding formula, which was designed to bridge a gap of about \$2.6 million in basic education subsidies over six years.

But special-education funding continues to be calculated separately, using a different formula that doesn't recognize a funding gap.

While school districts got a 5.6 percent increase in basic education subsidies under the new formula this year, their special-ed funding increased by only 1.6 percent.

Advocates for the disabled said the costing-out formula needs to be applied to both special-education and basic-education funding to correct the disparities.

"If it's good enough for basic education, it's good enough for special education, too," said Baruch Kintisch, of the Education Law Center, which paid for the special-ed study along with the Disability Rights Network and the Arc of Pennsylvania.

Those groups and other advocates for the disabled plan to lobby lawmakers to adopt a new funding formula, Kintisch said.

"I think there's a lot of interest in the General Assembly for doing that," he said.

Under the current system, the state determines how much money is available for special-education programs without considering actual need, Kintisch said.

It then distributes the funds based on the population of each school district, assuming that 16 percent of students need special-education services — regardless of what the actual percentage is.

The formula "doesn't correlate to anything in reality," Kintisch said.

Advocates want a new formula that takes into account a five-year average of special-education enrollment and considers the unique characteristics of each district, including the wealth of residents and the property tax burden.

The funding formula also would take into account the gap between actual funding and what is needed to serve all students, just as the basic-education formula does.

Bridging the state's share of the \$380 million special-ed funding gap would require only a 4 percent increase in funding each year over six years, Kintisch said.

Lawmakers will begin considering the findings of the special-ed funding report Thursday, at a 9 a.m. hearing of the special education subcommittee of the House Education Committee.

Kintisch said he expects special-education funding to be "the No. 1 education issue" in the debate over the 2009-10 budget.

"If the special-education funding formula is not fixed, it's like having a hole in the bucket," he said. "The whole system needs to be funded adequately to function properly."

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