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EDITORIAL

Special effort: The state is not finished on education funding

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You have to look through a long lens to see the benefits of increasing state funding for special education, and that's especially true now, with the nation's economy tanking and the state's budget being squeezed.

But a study released last week by advocates for students with special needs and disabilities does just that, and it makes a compelling case for revising the formula used to determine how much state funding each school district receives.

Last year, Gov. Ed Rendell and the Legislature publicly acknowledged the need for a greater share of state dollars for education, and a new formula for basic education was devised. It was based in large measure on a much-lauded cost study conducted by consultants Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc.

The change was no easy sell for the governor's administration, and there was a recognition that including special-education costs might have scotched the deal. But with improvements now under way in funding basic education, the state shouldn't wait too long to address special education.

The same consultants studied that, and they concluded 391 of the 501 districts weren't spending enough on special education, which the study said costs more than twice as much as teaching students without special needs.

In the last five years, the rate of increase in state dollars for basic education has gone up faster than funding for special education. Where annual increases for basic were 3 percent to as much as 6.5 percent, annual increases for special ed were just 1.3 percent to 2.7 percent.

Over the same period, the percentage of Pennsylvania students in need of special ed services has been going up. In the 2006-07 school year, the figure was 270,930, representing 15 percent of the state's 1.8 million students. Four years earlier, the figure was 13.5 percent.

Why is it in the best interest of the state and local school districts to do a better job of funding special education? For one thing, schools are required by federal law to provide appropriate educations for all students and doing the job right reduces legal liability. But there are less-selfish motives. Adequate spending on appropriate programs results in lower drop-out rates and less absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions. Academic performance improves and, along with it, the likelihood that students will be self-sufficient and successful.

Individuals with special needs face extra challenges in trying to become productive citizens. Witness the fact that, based on 1998 data, 71 percent of special-education students were unemployed after leaving school. If these students don't receive an adequate education, how can they be expected to succeed? And though the cost of education is high, the price of providing a lifetime of public assistance is far higher.

Pennsylvania, along with 10 other states, gives its school districts a lump sum for special-education based on overall enrollment. That doesn't ensure that the dollars go where they're most needed. A good start would be revising the formula so that allocations are based on the actual number of special education students in each district.

It's in everyone's interest to make sure students get the education they deserve.