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Support funding to educate children with disabilities

Baruch Kintisch

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Children with disabilities often experience tremendous challenges when they reach adulthood. National research shows that about 70 percent of all adults with disabilities are unemployed.

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Unemployment is costly for the individual and for the broader society. It can mean a greater reliance on public benefits and significant isolation from the world of work, taxes, elections, shopping malls, and everything else that constitutes full participation in Pennsylvania community life.

Ensuring a quality education for all children in all public schools in Pennsylvania is the first step in preventing this unfortunate outcome. Each school district must have the resources to offer effective education and special supports for students with disabilities.

Adequate funding is important and it must be spent on strategies with a track record of helping children succeed. Most students eligible for special education can learn and achieve at high levels along with other students, if they receive the extra supports and services necessary to accommodate their disabilities.

But in 2008, the General Assembly increased special education funding only 1.6 percent while funding for other students was increased 5.2 percent. In 2009, the state provided no increase for special education, while basic education funding was increased 5.7 percent. And the state system for ensuring effective investment of special education resources to meet student needs remains outdated and slow to respond to problems.

In short, the state system of funding and accountability for students with disabilities is completely broken. Year after year, state officials have told families and disability advocates to be patient. But these important needs now seem to have been forgotten by many.

Some brave legislators from both parties have decided that this situation cannot continue. More than 80 state representatives and senators have co-sponsored House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940.

These bills would fix the state system for special education funding and accountability.

In 2009, the House Education Committee twice approved House Bill 704, by large bipartisan majority votes of 22-3 and 23-2.

This reform legislation is necessary and responsible. There would be no additional cost until 2011, which is after the economy has had a chance to recover.

The cost in subsequent years is quite reasonable, raising state expenditures for special education by about 3.5 percent per year over a six-year period.

The reform legislation also ensures that these new investments would make a real difference for children with disabilities. The accountability section of the bill requires that school districts spend the new dollars on things that will improve academic outcomes for students.

It is long past time for our commonwealth to address these important issues.

We urge Gov. Ed Rendell to talk about special education funding reform in his annual budget

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