

Beaver County Times

EDITORIAL

It's about time

Changing formula for special education is long overdue

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The state House has taken a first step toward revamping the funding formula for special education.

While that is a positive step forward, getting to this point should not have been so hard or taken so long. As important as this legislation is, it shows how woefully ineffective the General Assembly can be, even in righting a mistake that's been apparent for almost two decades.

The current funding formula has been around since 1991, and it has a serious flaw - it has no basis in reality. It assumes that 16 percent of the students in every district in the commonwealth are special-need children and bases reimbursement on that percentage. If a district has more than 16 percent, it's too bad. Local taxpayers have to pick up the added tab.

The formula also did not provide adequate funding for costs that were over and above the special education reimbursement, once again leaving local school districts (and their taxpayers) to carry most of the load.

The House's bill would change that to allow the General Assembly to determine the level of state funding for special education each year, and the formula would be applied to distribute any increase in funding.

According to a news release from the office of state Rep. Mike Sturla, D-Lancaster, the main sponsor of the measure, the formula would use several factors to decide a district's allocation, including the actual number of special-need students in a district, the base cost to educate all students, a different weight for each of three cost categories for students with disabilities, and district-specific variables for actual spending, poverty, tax effort and cost of living.

The legislation also includes provisions that would ensure that no school sees a reduction in special education funding from current levels, as well as accountability standards that streamline and strengthen the requirement for districts to implement three-year special education plans.

A major question remains, though. Will the Legislature adequately fund special education year in and year out, or will it shortchange districts?

Sturla, who deserves an enormous amount of credit for pursuing these changes, acknowledged that more work remains by calling it a "first step" on several occasions.

This bill may sound good, but the devil is in the details. That's why a wait-and-see approach is in order.