

State Costing-Out Study Provides Insight into Rising Local Education Costs

By Lisa Andrejko, Ed.D. , Superintendent QCSD Schools

How much does it cost to educate a child in Pennsylvania? Now that is a controversial question! It is one I ask myself just about every day. There are so many other related questions:

Does each child cost the same?

Is it the same for Kindergarten, senior high, special education, gifted, or non-English speaking?

What impact does zip code have on what is spent to educate a child?

Does the fact that the child's school district is home to the King of Prussia Mall mean that since there is more money available to spend on the child that they deserve more than a child in a district with no mall?

There are times that as a superintendent I disagree with what comes down to the schools from Harrisburg or Washington. However, in 2006, funds were set aside in the budget to try to find some answers to those questions.

The "costing out" study, mandated under Act 114 of 2006, required the state board to focus on the adequacy and equity of school funding and to determine what educational resources and related expenditures are necessary to provide a quality primary and secondary education for each student in the commonwealth's public schools. The study was conducted for the board by the firm of Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA).

APA began work last January and presented the final report to the State Board on Nov. 14. The following day, the board approved a resolution to accept the report and formally transmit the study to the governor and General Assembly.

The report, posted at www.pde.state.pa.us/stateboard_ed, contains a chart with a district-by-district listing that compares each district's actual spending per pupil with its costing-out estimate.

APA says that achieving the \$21.86 billion adequacy level would require an additional \$4.61 billion or 26.8%. On a per-pupil basis, the adequacy level averages \$12,057 (compared with current spending of \$9,512), including:

- A base cost of \$8,003 for all students, assuming they have no special needs.
- A modification of enrollment to recognize growth and decline over five years.
- An additional weight for students with disabilities (1.30 or \$10,404).
- An additional weight for children in poverty (0.43 or \$3,441).
- An additional weight for English language learners (highest weights for the smallest districts, with a minimum of 1.48).
- An additional weight for gifted students (highest weights for the smallest districts, with a minimum of 0.20).
- A district size modification that recognizes higher per-pupil costs in small districts.
- A geographic cost of living adjustment.

The report calculates adequacy levels for each district, based upon its own student and community characteristics. The report also notes that 474 districts are spending less

than their adequacy levels and that 27 districts spend above that level. The least wealthy districts are furthest from meeting their resource needs; they would need an additional 34.9% (compared to the average of 26.8%). The wealthiest districts would need only an additional 6.6%.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association welcomed the results of the costing-out study.

“For the first time, PSBA and other public education advocates have a research-based answer to the question of how much it should cost to educate a student in Pennsylvania,” said PSBA Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel.

“In many ways, the study validates what PSBA and other public education advocates have been saying for years,” said Gentzel, “specifically that Pennsylvania depends entirely too much on local revenues to support our public schools and that the state needs to take a larger role in that funding.”

One of the major concerns is what happens next. House Resolution 460, which would create a Joint Legislative Commission on Public School Finance, has been introduced in the House. One of the commission’s main duties would be to analyze and make recommendations based on the findings of the costing-out study. Its report would be due one year from its first meeting. So far, the resolution has not received consideration from the House Education Committee.

The state has reduced its subsidy to local schools in the past few years. In the seventies, the state provided over 50% of the cost per child. In the 1998-99 school year, just 10 years ago, the State funded 24.4% of QCSD instructional costs. Last year the State funded 18.4% of QCSD instructional costs. The result is a burden to the local taxpayer.

Some may say well the state and federal funds come from the taxpayers as well. However, both the state and federal officials set their priorities for spending. Those budgets do not have the level of scrutiny that perhaps they should. It is worth examining where the youth of this state and country lie as a priority.

The entire costing-out study can be found on the QCSD website at www.qcsd.org. While it is a complex topic, the report does a nice job explaining the factors that need to be considered and why it is so hard to place a price on the education of a child.

Dr. Lisa Andrejko is the superintendent of Schools for the Quakertown Community School District and will be a frequent contributor to provide insight to the school district.