

HOW HAS PENNSYLVANIA'S EDUCATION FUNDING SYSTEM CHANGED OVER TIME?

“The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth.” – Constitution of PA, Article III, Sec. 14

Early History

Public education has been a state responsibility since Pennsylvania first joined the union. However, funding for public schools in the Commonwealth has gone through many changes over time.

The state first started giving funds for public schools in 1834. At that time, the state required school districts to raise two dollars from local taxes for every dollar of state funding. This meant that local school districts would have access to very different levels of funding based largely on the amount of money they could raise on their own. This system led to tremendous inequity between Pennsylvania districts.

Over time, however, the state began to contribute more support to public schools, which helped to even out the funding and access to resources across districts.

Since 1965

From 1965 to 1983 the General Assembly required the state to pay for at least half of the total cost of public education. The state's contribution reached its peak of 55% in 1974. The high share of state spending was intended to ensure that all students received a quality education, even if they lived in a low wealth school district.

Since 1985, state support has decreased significantly. In 1992 the state funding formula was frozen, meaning that the state's contribution would basically stay the same year after year (plus small and unpredictable increases) no matter how districts changed. At this time, the state funding system contains dozens of confusing “supplements”, each with its own different formula. Student enrollment and other fundamental factors are no longer considered in allocating most state funding.

Today the General Assembly contributes only 36% of public education funding. Only a few states contribute less. (See Education Week, “Quality Counts” (2004), available at www.edweek.org.) Local districts must pay for the rest - usually from property taxes - despite the great differences in property values and family income in different communities. The low state share of education funding is also unfair because all districts and their students must meet state and federal requirements for high student achievement.

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Recent Initiatives

In response to these problems, the Governor and the General Assembly have started to consider changing the funding system for public education. The ultimate goal is to reform the funding formula to give all students an equal chance to get a quality education. But to date the state has not made major reforms to the system.

- As part of the state budget since 2005, Foundation Funding has set the goal for supporting every student in the state with a minimum level of funding, but much more money is needed to actually reach this goal.
- The 2006-07 state education budget authorized a costing-out/adequacy study to help determine what this "foundation" amount should be. The study was completed in November 2007, concluding that many districts need more resources in order to provide a quality education for all children. For more information see http://www.pde.state.pa.us/stateboard_ed/site/default.asp?g=0.
- The Governor and the General Assembly must now use the study results to fix the state's broken and ineffective funding system for public education.

GET INVOLVED!

Pennsylvania's school funding formula still has a long way to go before it can provide an adequate and equitable education for all students. To find out more about costing-out/adequacy studies and to learn how you can get involved in changing school funding in Pennsylvania, visit the websites listed above for the Education Law Center and Good Schools Pennsylvania.