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School funding: Beyond quick fixes

By BARUCH KINTISCH & JANIS RISCH

LOCAL OFFICIALS have recently engaged in a public and heated discussion about the finances of the School District of Philadelphia.

While the budget deficit deserves close attention, we must also remember that the current financial problems are symptoms of a larger problem: chronic under-funding of the school district as a whole.

Currently, the school district spends slightly below the state average per student - only \$10,834 a year. Compare this to Cheltenham (\$15,233), Lower Merion (\$20,221) and other nearby communities. Yet Philadelphia schools shoulder greater educational responsibilities than many of these communities, with large percentages of students requiring extra services to overcome educational disadvantages.

These things cost money, but the school district, like many other under-funded districts in the state, currently has to make do with far less than is truly needed to give students a fair chance. The good news is that the state is finally beginning to address the underlying problem of inadequate funding for Pennsylvania's disadvantaged school districts.

In June, the General Assembly quietly acknowledged that the education-funding system needs a major overhaul, and commissioned a "costing-out study" to determine the funding needed to provide a quality education to every child in every school district. The study, which will include public meetings around the state, should be in full swing within the next couple of months.

The General Assembly is also considering forming an independent commission to draft legislation that would make changes in the state's school funding system based on the results of the costing-out study.

Similar steps have been successfully taken by dozens of other states in order to fix their broken-down school finance systems. With additional leadership from the governor's office, our state now has its best shot in many years at actually providing education funding at appropriate levels and holding schools accountable for helping all children to succeed in school.

The current budget deficit should not distract us from these important developments.

We need to be ready to answer such questions as these: What programs and supports does the Philadelphia School District really need to help students compete on an even playing field? What are the specific ways that the district would use new funding to improve student achievement?

HOW WOULD local schools be held accountable for producing results? What are the options for raising the revenue needed to support these efforts? What is a fair contribution to expect from the state? And finally, how can the mayor, City Council, state legislators, district officials, business leaders and others work together to address these issues?

We will only get so far by arguing over how to divide up what is currently a very limited pie. Our local leaders should also look beyond the crisis of the moment, and engage in careful study, strategic planning and political teamwork to find ways to put enough on the table so that our children can be properly nourished.

The costing-out study and the prospects for an independent school-funding reform commission present a unique opportunity to move toward such historic reforms. Local leaders should embrace this new opportunity and make sure that, as the process moves forward, Philadelphia's concerns are heard.

When it comes to creating a brighter future for Philadelphia's children, everyone should be pulling together.

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