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Legislature failing to provide equal school funding

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Last month's primary election and its outcomes have been widely interpreted as a sign of public outrage over legislative pay hikes. But there is a broader significance as well.

Prominent and repeated reporting by the news media can make a difference when there is a pressing issue of legislative integrity and accountability. For the upcoming general election, that same intense coverage can inform another pressing majoritarian issue: the Legislature's neglect of equal and adequate state funding for public schools.

Pennsylvania's Constitution makes the Legislature responsible for schools, saying "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. " Yet Pennsylvania is 43d worst among the states in school funding inequality and 49th worst in providing the state's share of school-district expenditures.

When Pennsylvania's Supreme Court, despite contrary Supreme Court decisions in five contiguous states, refused to enforce this constitutional responsibility, decisions on school funding were left entirely to the Legislature.

The court's 1999 decisions in two cases, *Marrero v. Commonwealth* and *Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools v. Ridge*, were filed late on an Indian summer Friday; their significance was not reported. The two justices who wrote opinions were on the retention ballot that fall. Had the people been informed, the revolt of Pennsylvania's voters might have begun then.

The Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia, of which we are members, reviewed the 2004-2005 school expenditures using data from the state Department of Education. Its analysis showed that Pennsylvania's school funding inequity is widespread: Eighty percent of Pennsylvania's school districts, 400 of 500, have very large funding gaps. Yet, the Legislature still does not act to end them.

The 400 districts average \$3,109 less per student per year than the top-performing, well-funded districts. This is more than \$75,000 less in each classroom of 25 children; \$90,000 less in city districts. That's enough to hire another teacher to reduce class sizes or fund science labs, Advanced Placement courses, libraries, textbooks, and counselors that make measurable differences.

These gross inequalities are Pennsylvania's starkest problem, for children, their families and for economic growth. Countless studies show the quality of schools to be a significantly more

weighty consideration in business location and expansion decisions than taxation. But gross school funding inequality is not a new issue for Pennsylvania's people.

On Dec. 30, 2002, the Lancaster New Era editorialized that Gov. Rendell had "achieved a mandate vote because of his commitment to educational reform. Pollsters . . . indicate that 80 percent of voters said they would vote for a candidate who was going to reform public education, even if it meant a tax increase. "

"Now," the New Era concluded, "is the time for complete, full and adequate reform of how we pay for education - not just a little bit now and maybe a little bit later. No property tax reform without education funding reform - rather, education funding reform and whatever tax reform can accomplish this goal. "

It hasn't happened. Instead, since 1976, veteran legislative leaders have said that a "gentleman's agreement" is maintained that allows no floor discussion of school funding inequalities. During the 2003-04 legislative session, viewers of the Pennsylvania Cable Network saw it happen one evening, when some House members began such a discussion and the presiding officer ruled it out of order.

Meanwhile, legislative leaders pretend that Rendell's commitment was only about property tax reductions, offering up bill after bill with smaller and smaller reductions and back-end referenda - which would freeze forever unaddressed gross school funding inequalities. And they don't even try to adopt those perverse pretend bills.

But polls show equal and adequate school funding at the top of the people's priority list. A 2005 poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates poignantly showed that when grandparents are counted, more than 60 percent of Pennsylvanians have children dear to them in public schools.

The Statewide Coalition to Close the Gap - a coalition of regional family, church, labor, taxpayer and school organizations - is surveying every candidate running in the general election to ascertain and publicize their commitment - or not - to ending school funding inequality.

One thing's for sure. If issues are covered prominently and often, people can know what's at stake in their Legislature, what positions their representatives have taken, and what candidates promise or do not promise to do. And the people can vote accordingly.

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