

York Daily Record

Op-Ed: Education bill needed

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by GREG KNOX

Elected officials in Harrisburg are demonstrating that they certainly can act as responsible public servants. In a time of political turmoil, that's a very good sign.

What is bringing out the best in our leaders in the state Capitol? A bill addressing the educational needs of students with disabilities -- House Bill 704.

This bill shouldn't have a chance, given the difficulties of state government in these days. But the bill is only days away from being approved by the House of Representatives and moving on to prompt consideration in the Senate. In a time when partisan tensions are common, HB 704 has 66 cosponsors from both parties and was approved by a bipartisan vote of 22 to 3 in the House Education Committee.

In a time when the energy of our commonwealth is most often focused away from improving the day-to-day lives of vulnerable citizens, HB 704 implements practical reforms that will improve teaching and learning for children with disabilities and thus give them an opportunity for a brighter and more independent future.

In a time when the word "funding" is a dirty word in the State Capitol, HB 704 has the courage to repair the state funding system for special education affecting students with disabilities. The bill fixes the system for distributing state dollars, although it neither contains nor requires any increases in state or local dollars in 2010-2011.

In a time when state and federal policy makers are more often equating "education reform" with radical top-down mandates that dictate one-size-fits-all changes -- such as the federal Race to the Top Grant Program or state reauthorization of the Education Empowerment Act -- HB 704 takes the different approach of strengthening existing accountability systems by requiring increased cooperation between local and state education officials.

The reforms in HB 704 are needed because special education was left out when the General Assembly enacted Basic Education reforms in 2008. Under HB 704, state funding for special education will be distributed based on the actual needs of students and schools and will remain at 2008-09 levels until the economy recovers.

The existing special education funding and accountability system in Pennsylvania is broken. No formula has been used since 2008-09. The formula used from 1992 to 2008 mistakenly assumed that 16 percent of all students in each district need special

education. Most districts have a percentage that is higher or lower than this. In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Education collects three-year special education plans from all school districts but real accountability is lacking. HB 704 addresses these problems.

Students with disabilities are struggling in most Pennsylvania schools and need special education reforms to have a chance for success in school and in life. There are more than 270,000 students in Pennsylvania who are receiving special education services. That's more students than the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh school districts combined. These students have a high drop-out rate and low scores on state assessments. The national unemployment rate for adults with disabilities is 71 percent. Yes, 71 percent. Our schools can do much better and HB 704 includes needed reforms.

The reforms proposed by HB 704 are needed in York County. Several school districts in the county have high numbers of students with disabilities. For example, more than 18 percent of all students in York City, Hanover Public, and West Shore school districts require special education services. Without the reforms in HB 704, these and other districts -- already with high property taxes -- will continue to struggle to pay for expensive special education programs and may need to cut corners.

Everyone in Pennsylvania benefits when students with disabilities receive an education preparing them for meaningful employment, higher education, and self-sufficiency. The General Assembly should move Pennsylvania one giant step closer to meeting these obligations by approving HB 704 before it adjourns for the summer.

For more information, see www.ReformSpecialEdFunding.org.

The Arc of York County is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of people with intellectual and other disabilities and their families.

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