

State wastes education money while starving districts

By MARK B. MILLER | Posted: Tuesday, June 24, 2014 6:00 am

Gov. Corbett took a great step forward on the special education landscape last June when he came to Bucks County to sign Act 3 into law. The Act formed a 15-member commission to recommend a new special education funding formula for public and charter schools that directs money where it is most needed in an equitable manner.

The commission, which filed a full report on Dec. 11, 2013 was the concept of two members of the General Assembly who introduced legislation now stalled in the state House of Representatives.

Sen. Pat Brown (author of Senate Bill 362) and Rep. Bernie O'Neill (author of House Bill 2138) had full support of the governor every step of the way. The highly profitable charter industry is pushing back despite a heightened need for relief.

Permanent cuts to education funding from the commonwealth in 2011 and 2012, followed by flat funding in 2013, have pushed most of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts against the wall. Taxpayers are frustrated, programs/services are cut to the bone and staffing is at historic minimums. If assistance cannot come in the form of new funds, there must be a reduction in unfunded mandates confronting public school districts.

House Bill 2138 would let public education keep funds that are now providing unjust enrichment for charter schools that are profiting from over-payments for special education services provided by their schools. In 2012-13, their schools received \$350 million while only spending \$150 million, resulting in \$200 million going to unintended purposes.

Another economy to public education could come through Sen. Andy Dinniman's legislation (Senate Bill 2144) seeking limits on graduation exams. If passed, the state would save \$70 million this year while saving public education more than \$100 million to cover the portion not funded by the state. These expenditures yield unjust enrichment for the corporate profiteers who design, administer and score the unfair and unproven tests. The same businesses stand ready on the other side to remediate students who can't pass tests designed to make children fail.

Level funding of public education is not equal to prior years due to escalating cost. It becomes essential to find ways to cut costs without impact to educating every child. We can do this in many ways. Further to the above, a key area would be regulating the compensation to cyber charter schools, currently funded under the same formula as brick and mortar charter schools.

The cost to educate a child online is a fraction of the cost for traditional public (or charter) schools. Cyber charters suck far more money out of public school budgets than cybers spend on teaching. More of that unjust enrichment, this time going to cyber operators like K-12 Cyber. Former CEO Packard

received \$13 million over five years while the profit making business ran over 19,000 television commercials. K-12 has never achieved the minimum educational standard for public schools.

Rep. Scott Petri suggests eliminating the “hold harmless” statute intended to protect public school districts from drops to income because it actually hurts more districts than it helps. Here again, charter school operators are trying to claim protection from HB 2138 under hold harmless provisions even though they do not apply to charter operators. Remove it!

While there are new funds to be had (for example, Rep. Gene DiGirolamo is pushing against the Holy Grail of taxing Marcellus Shale profits), there are a dozen ways to protect public education from financial ruin and privatization. Things like eliminating the “double dip” for charter schools who also share in funds that are not connected to their service.

We need reform to the state pension cost to school districts. We need the state to pay past due reimbursement for construction. Dare we ask for financial support to collect data required by the state and federal departments of Education? Prevailing wage?

Pennsylvania is near the bottom (46th) when you compare the percentage of public education costs borne by each state. We are one of only three states without a funding formula for basic education (although Rep. O’Neill’s legislation to form a basic education funding commission seems to be moving forward and has support from Gov.. Corbett). A great start would be to remove the roadblock to HB 2138 where the House is likely to approve it.

One thing is certain: The unjust enrichment of big business through taxpayer money intended for public education is just wrong.