

COMMENTARY

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Proposed cuts would break a promise to Maryland's kids

By Bebe Verdery

Ten years ago, the General Assembly made a historic commitment to the education of children in Maryland. In the years since, thanks to advocates in the legislature and Gov. Martin O'Malley, it has paid off in improved graduation rates, higher student achievement and — because of expanded pre-kindergarten — greater numbers of children who start school on track to succeed. Nowhere is this turnaround more evident than in Baltimore City, though increased funding has lifted the boats of kids all over the state.

Now that turnaround is threatened, both because of the legislature's effective cuts (through removal of inflation adjustments) in the last three years and because of proposed cuts in this year's budget. To be sure, state leaders have had to deal with a distressed economy and reduced revenue, forcing tough budget decisions involving many important programs. But education is not the place to cut. Education funding is our seed corn. If we eat it now instead of planting it, there's no harvest down the road. Last fall, Mr. O'Malley talked about moving forward. Educating our state's children — especially our poorest — is the epitome of moving forward.

The engine that has driven so much educational success is the Thornton formula, established in 2002 with passage of the Bridge to Excellence Act, which increased statewide funding based on what students needed in 2000-2001. There was a six-year ramp up to reach the new state funding formula. Significantly, the Thornton law's inflation component guaranteed that the state would keep meeting the Thornton standards going forward.

Then, in 2008, the first effective cuts to Thornton education funding started when the inflation component was removed and the education budget "flat lined" to save money. The last three years of flat lining has meant a cumulative reduction in education spending that now approaches \$2 billion from where it should have been under Thornton. Without formula-driven inflation adjustments, schools that could least afford it had to cut programs, taking a disproportionate toll on the state's poorest students.

Now poor kids are in for a double whammy. For the first time in Maryland's recent history, state leaders are considering actual cuts to the education budget that would reduce per-pupil funding to levels below those of three years ago.

Under this scenario, Baltimore City Public Schools would receive \$15 million less than in the current year, even though enrollment grew by more than 850 students. Those cuts could mean the loss of two teachers at a typical Baltimore K-8 school and potentially the loss of art, music and after-school programs. In Prince George's County it would mean the cancellation of full-day pre-kindergarten and magnet programs. Similar hardships will affect the poorest children all over the state.

Making matters even worse, school systems with large numbers of poor are hit twice — once by a reduction in aid to all children and then again in a reduction to the Thornton law's additional funding directed to children with special needs, including those with disabilities, English-language learners and low-income students.

The proposal also imposes a sharp cap of 1 percent on any future inflation increases for all school districts. This means that state education dollars — and learning opportunities for children — will continue to fall further behind each year.

In short, today's proposed cuts, on top of three years of flat lining, threaten the constitutional right of children in our state, primarily poor and minority students, to get the thorough and efficient education promised to them in the Maryland Constitution.

The public understands the value of a good education — especially when times are tough. A recent poll found that 82 percent of Maryland voters oppose the proposed \$100 million cut in education funding. The governor and state legislators should uphold the promise made when the Thornton law was passed 10 years ago. They must restore the education budget and ensure all our children can keep moving forward.

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