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Thornton Commission legislation seen as starting point for new funding reforms for Maryland schools

New analysis calls for greater transparency, more decision-making by parents

ROCKVILLE (November 18, 2008)—An analysis of Maryland's Thornton Commission legislation has found significant increases in per pupil spending, a slight equalization in funding among the state's school districts, and a declining pupil-staff ratio, according to a report released today by the Maryland Public Policy Institute and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

The study also recommended two changes in how the state funds its schools, calling for more transparency in per pupil funding among school districts via a new state Web site, and providing tuition directly to parents, who would choose the schools their children attend.

The Bridge Act, enacted in 2002, restructured Maryland's school funding system, setting the funding amount for "base" students, bringing state funding for kindergarten students on par with students in grades 1–12, and collapsing about 50 school funding programs into eight. The legislation enacted as a result of the Thornton Commission's work is often referred to as the Bridge Act.

The act also increased the state's cigarette tax by 34 cents per pack to fund the increases in school funding to school systems, and imposed new accountability provisions, making the state's school districts accountable for meeting student achievement benchmarks, including sanctions for low school performance.

"The Maryland General Assembly should be commended for its actions in 2002 when it greatly simplified the state's public school funding system," said Robert Enlow, Executive Director of the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation. "However, there is still much work to be done to truly make the system transparent, and to better engage and empower parents into the educational enterprise."

"We propose a full school choice program, one in which parents are given the tax dollars earmarked for their children, and in which they can choose the school—public or private—that best serves the needs of their children. This would seem to be fully consistent with bold premises in the original Bridge Act, and would significantly add a dose of empowerment and accountability to the consumers of education.

"With the enactment of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act in 2002 which resulted in the largest funding increase for public education in Maryland, lawmakers in Annapolis sent the clear message that the debate over funding public education in Maryland is over. It's now time to produce the increased academic gains that is always promised with an increase in funding," said Christopher B. Summers, president of the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

The report's findings include:

- Spending per student in Maryland increased significantly since the passage of the Bridge Act, jumping from \$8,344 in FY 2003 to \$10,371 in 2007—about a 10 percent real (inflation-adjusted) increase in spending over this time. Had spending increased at the rate of inflation, it would have reached \$9,415 per student in FY 2007.
- Funding per student became slightly more equalized across school systems between FY 2003 and FY 2007.
- Maryland school systems used their increased funding to hire more personnel between FY 2003 and FY 2007, as pupil to instructional staff ratio declined by 5.2 percent; pupil to professional support staff ratio declined by 8.8 percent; and pupil to instructional assistant ratio declined by 14.4 percent. Overall, the pupil to total staff ratio fell from 11.2 in FY 2003 to 10.4 in FY 2007, a 7.1 percent decline.
- Maryland teachers received a modest real increase in salaries between 2002 and 2005. While inflation increased by 6.7 percent during this time period, Maryland teacher salaries increased by 8.5 percent.

“Our recommendations provide the ultimate in accountability and empowerment, providing parents with the decision-making authority as to where they send their children to school,” Enlow added. “Not only will parents have better information as to how schools spend their funds, but they will also have the power to choose schools. We have found that this is what parents want, but it will also make all schools better. Using the Bridge to Excellence system as a starting point, these recommendations could be structured in a way that would not cost Maryland taxpayers any additional resources.”

Founded in 2001, the Maryland Public Policy Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. The Maryland Public Policy Institute's work can be found on the Internet at www.mdpolicy.org.

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