

Spartanburg Herald

School groups present a starting point for debate over new system

New way to fund schools

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South Carolina's school groups have given lawmakers an excellent start as they look for a new way to fund schools.

Replacing the current funding system is necessary. The state's method of allocating money to schools is based on the property tax, but that tax, as it applies to homes, is no longer used for school operations.

The old method of funding schools has led to tremendous inequities. Most children in Spartanburg County were blessed with good schools, but students along the I-95 corridor struggled.

And, as the General Assembly tinkered with the tax code and "tax reform," it twisted and deformed the school funding system. The last straw was the debacle of Act 388 and its hornets' nest of unintended consequences.

The bottom line is that we now have a method of funding education in this state that isn't working. The state needs a new system that funds good schools at their current level and raises the funding of struggling schools.

The S.C. School Boards Association, the S.C. Association of School Administrators and the S.C. Association of School Business Officials have stepped forward with a plan of their own. It deserves serious consideration by lawmakers.

The task of creating a new system is complex and expensive. The state has to provide a base level of revenue for all schools while giving additional resources to impoverished schools. But it has to maintain the higher funding of successful schools in wealthier communities. Most of the money will have to come from the state, but

local communities have to be able to enhance that funding if they wish.

The plan issued by the education groups, titled the S.C. Jobs, Education and Tax Act (SCJET), includes all these priorities.

In essence, it establishes a statewide property tax levy of 100 mills, cutting tax rates in almost all of the state's school districts. It rolls up most state funding programs into one and combines these streams to fund schools according to a formula that gives all schools at least as much as they've had and allocates more to poorer schools. It also allows local communities to put more money into their schools through a local levy, which can be increased by referendum.

The plan would require more money from the state, but the groups leave it up to lawmakers to decide where they generate that money.

SCJET will appeal to lawmakers' priority for replacing local revenue with state revenue. It seems they want all the purse strings held in Columbia. But that's also what makes local school administrators nervous. Past experience makes them leery of trusting lawmakers with all of their funding.

SCJET seems like a reasonable compromise of many competing interests. It's the kind of compromise that will be necessary to gain support for a new funding system among lawmakers from various parts of the state.

The important thing is to jump-start the process of creating a new and equitable funding system. The education groups have done that. Lawmakers should take the ball from here.

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