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Adjust state's school funding formula? State should show fairness to urban school districts

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Our View

The legislature should aspire to fairness in its school funding mechanism, and that certainly should include increases for overly burdened urban school systems.

The state has traveled a long, winding road on K-12 funding, from a system that shortchanged schools in rural areas, to a lawsuit addressing that need, to the creation of the Basic Education Program that supplies the formula for school funds, to the need to look now at special needs in big-city school districts.

The system should be rooted in fairness, so there is no reason to view the issue as a competition between urban and rural schools. All it takes is adequate attention to the needs in all schools and a fair-minded approach toward meeting them. Surely, the legislature can achieve that goal.

Urban school systems have special needs. They serve high numbers of at-risk students, and they tend to have greater challenges in the number of English Language Learner programs, trying to meet the needs of immigrant populations. The current formula isn't meeting those needs, so it's time for the General Assembly to address the matter head-on.

In June, Davidson County Chancellor Carol McCoy dismissed the 18-year-old lawsuit brought by a coalition of school districts in primarily rural areas that sought fairness in funding. The case reached the Tennessee Supreme Court, which found that the school funding system was unconstitutional. The suit led to the establishment of the Basic Education Program in 1992.

McCoy's reasoning for dismissing the longstanding suit was that the issue was essentially solved. Advocates for the small schools who achieved the legal victory expressed concern that the issue might be revisited. The General Assembly in the last session passed a resolution that called upon the state to seek a funding system that would be fairer to big-city school districts. Gov. Phil Bredesen has expressed support for helping the urban schools.

The state should not have to see another lengthy legal battle to bring fairness to the urban schools. But it should be clear that there are flaws in the current formula. The heart of the matter is the needs of the students in those urban districts. The General Assembly should address those needs in K-12 school funding. The formula should be revisited.

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