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THE BOTTOM LINE

Editorial: School-funding panel should begin with look at Ohio's budget reality

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For members of the Ohio School Funding Advisory Council, this is an inauspicious time to begin their task of recommending how much the state should spend on schools. Without a penny to spare in the current biennial budget and a mind-boggling deficit of billions of dollars looming in the next one, the group will find no gravy to spread around. In fact, cuts are more likely.

But the 28-member panel, which meets for the first time on Thursday, can do the state a great service if members recognize that fact and focus their efforts on devising the best possible school-spending plan with the limited resources available.

That would be a change from what some have seen as the council's mandate: to decide what schools ideally should have and tell the legislature how much to allocate, regardless of how much money is available or how much any other state program needs -- all based on a faulty assumption that school spending forever will increase.

That idea that education, among all the critical services delivered by state government, should be exempt from the give and take of competing funding needs never was reasonable. Now, given the state's straitened circumstances, it's impossible.

Unfortunately, the budget law that created the panel doesn't encourage practicality. It enshrines Gov. Ted Strickland's preoccupation with the *inputs* of education, the idea that schools will be successful if they just have a specified number of teachers, counselors, classrooms and the like. Besides being a transparent gift to teachers unions, the checklist approach has little provision for fostering innovation and encouraging those programs that work better than others.

The panel also, by law, is stacked with people bound to have a vested interest in the education status quo, not to mention a financial interest in bigger education budgets. Of the 28 seats, 13 are reserved for people directly involved in preschool-through-12{+t}{+h}-grade education. Only one

person represents the public, and one seat each is saved for the business community, philanthropic organizations and the Ohio Academy of Science. Two are from higher education and four represent charter schools. The remaining seats go to the governor or his designee and four people named by leaders in the Ohio House and Senate.

Without doubt, the panelists will hear from the usual chorus of school-spending boosters. To do its job right, the council also should hear from the state budget director and tax commissioner and others who can keep the process grounded in fiscal reality: How much will the state have to spend on education in the 2012-13 biennium?

The answer, barring an economic miracle or a federal bail-out that would sink the nation further into debt, is likely to be less than the education establishment deems adequate.

That leaves the council with a job far more important and harder than lobbying for a bigger share of the state treasury. It means paring down a large wish list to those items that will do the most to improve the academic performance of Ohio's children.