

## Rendell plan gets local support

The governor's proposal faces opposition from Republicans.

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School officials have just three weeks to pass next year's budgets, yet still don't know if they'll have millions more to spend or whether political squabbling is about to put the brakes on Gov. Ed Rendell's effort to change public education funding in [Pennsylvania](#).

School and local government officials fanned out Monday in Bethlehem, Allentown and more than a dozen other locations to back Rendell's plan to boost education spending by \$2.6 billion over six years.

But top Republicans in Harrisburg said they doubt the state budget will be passed without tweaks to Rendell's proposed new funding formula, which would pump an additional \$90 million into Allentown schools and \$23 million into Bethlehem area schools by 2014.

"This gives us a predictability in the funding formula. The present formula is basically broken," Allentown Superintendent Karen S. Angello said after a rally on the front steps of Allen High School.

Bethlehem Area Superintendent Joseph Lewis said Rendell's proposed formula is imperfect but a good start in creating a fairer funding system and the Legislature should get on board with it soon.

"It's not just an urban issue," Lewis said Monday at a news conference attended by Bethlehem Mayor [John Callahan](#) and officials from a half-dozen school districts in [Northampton](#) and Monroe counties. "It's a suburban and rural issue."

Because the formula is based largely on each district's demographics and need, some districts get a massive influx, such as Allentown's 144 percent increase over its 2005-06 funding, while smaller, more wealthy districts would get almost nothing more. For example, under the formula, Saucon Valley School District is slated to get just an additional \$40,563 over six years.

Republican leaders said they were concerned about the total cost and the fact many districts would receive a basic education funding increase that's less than the rate of inflation.

"Having so many districts -- many of them rural -- in line for just a 1.5 percent increase is causing a great deal of concern in our caucus. I don't see how his formula can get done without some adjustments," said Erik Arneson, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi, R-[Delaware](#).

The growing fight has its roots in the Lehigh Valley. In 2006, the Legislature authorized the state Department of Education to conduct a \$500,000 "costing out" study to determine "the basic cost" to educate all students. The state study was based on a similar report by Education 2010, a local education advocacy group, done for the Allentown district.

The state study results, released in December 2007, found the state would have needed to provide \$21.63 billion -- or \$4.38 billion in additional money -- in the 2005-06 school year to the 501 school districts.

Lawmakers called for further study, but Rendell said he's seen enough. His budget includes a formula aimed at getting all students performing on grade level by 2014, the deadline imposed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

After meeting Monday with House and Senate leaders, Rendell said there's "sentiment in all four caucuses to change that formula," but said lawmakers must work quickly. He said the two big questions are: "Are we going to do it Â...[and] what's the formula for distribution?"

Sen. Pat Browne, R-Lehigh, said all sides want a new formula, but he would have preferred to examine the results of the six-month-old Legislature's study to determine if the findings were correct. Now, officials have to come up with a compromise based on the formula Rendell's budget team used.

"We've not had a formula that has worked in 30 years," Browne said, "and to take a brand-new approach after two months that can grow into something that is appropriate is a little quick."

John A. Toleno, superintendent of the Stroudsburg Area School District, said Rendell offers not just cash -- Stroudsburg Area would get an additional \$653,943 next year and a total of \$4.6 million over six years -- but also a sense of order to school funding.

"The only thing that is consistent in school systems is the bell," Toleno said at the Bethlehem news conference. "The funding brings consistency."

Alan Tjeltveit, whose daughter Anna and son William attend Allentown's Union Terrace Elementary School, said now is the time for Harrisburg to enact a new funding formula.

"This is crucial for Pennsylvania and for Allentown," said the psychology professor at [Muhlenberg College](#). "My kids' teachers have been universally great, but class sizes are huge, and it becomes difficult for teachers to give students individualized instruction."

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