

## State officials tout funding increases

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Bucks County Courier Times

A new state law to invest \$2.6 billion into public education over six years will initially reap few benefits for local school systems, according to area education officials.

Pennsylvania lawmakers and Gov. Edward Rendell came to terms on the new law last week as state officials put together the commonwealth's budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year.

It calls for using state funds to ensure that resources get to mainstream classrooms with the greatest need, state officials said. Special education costs, which tend to be more expensive than basic education expenses, are not included in the new funding initiative.

Locally, the Bristol Township School District will initially reap the most benefit from the new law, according to state figures and local officials.

"That's because we are considered a less wealthy district than other districts, so they are giving us more money to [cover] our per pupil expenditures," said Gerald Barcik, Bristol Township's business manager.

Bristol Township will receive almost \$19 million from the state for basic education in 2008-09, state education department officials said. That's a 7.52 percent increase from the 2007-08 subsidy.

It saves Bristol Township taxpayers about 4.5 mills, or roughly \$1.8 million, that would be needed to help cover 2008-09 expenses in the nearly \$119 million budget, Barcik said.

Barcik included the anticipated savings in the final budget approved in late June by the Bristol Township school board. The financial plan calls for the total millage to be 176.453 mills, an increase of 5.278 mills from 2007-08.

Had the state not increased its basic education funding, the millage increase would likely have been closer to 10 mills, Barcik said.

Most other area districts are not seeing the same kind of relief. They will receive an estimated 3 percent increase in their basic education subsidy, according to state education department estimations.

That is, however, about 1 percent more than the subsidy increases realized in recent years, officials said.

In some districts, the 3 percent increase is actually more money than officials expected to receive from the state.

For instance, the Centennial School District's subsidy increased by \$167,937 over what was budgeted, said Timothy Vail, the district's business administrator. However, that increase helps offset the special education funding subsidy that was about \$25,000, or 1 percent, less than expected, he said.

District officials are not sure how the additional funding will be used, Vail said. They do not plan to suggest that the board reopen the 2008-09 budget to lower the district's millage rate because the tax bills have already been sent out, he said.

A similar situation occurred with Pennsbury's state subsidies, said Isabel Miller, the district's business administrator.

Pennsbury officials budgeted for a 2 percent basic subsidy increase but will receive 3 percent more than in 2007-08, she said. That equates to \$142,658 and will be used to help offset the lower-than-expected special education subsidy, which is \$43,144 less than budgeted, Miller said.

All local districts are receiving estimated 1 percent increases in special education subsidies instead of the 2 percent of recent years, officials said. That is despite repeated calls from local school officials for Harrisburg to increase its funding levels for special education.

In one recent instance, Bensalem school board member Rose Jacobs suggested if the state fully funded its special education mandates there would be no need to raise local property taxes to cover expenses.

The mandates vary depending on the disabilities of the students in each respective district, but only a fraction of them are funded by the state, officials said.

For instance, in Bristol Township, special education costs are expected to be about \$18 million in 2008-09, Barcik said. However, the state special education subsidy is expected to cover only about \$4.3 million of the expenses, he said.

State officials said it's the best they can do given the current economic state.

"Despite an extremely difficult economy that necessitated cutting the state budget by nearly \$600 million, the department of education is pleased that we were able to raise special [education] funding by 1.7 percent and also raise basic [education] funding by an unprecedented degree," said Sheila Ballen, the state education department's director of communications and strategic research.

Other states have reduced public school funding because of budget shortfalls, Ballen said. "[But] Pennsylvania made the opposite choice because investing in regular and special education is essential to ensuring academic success and future economic growth," she said.

Even so, the new law, the result of a compromise between state Republican and Democratic leaders in Harrisburg, does not go as far as education officials would have liked, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education Web site.

"But it does set out a clear long-term framework for ensuring adequate resources in every classroom," education officials said on the PDE Web site.

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