

Wednesday, Jul. 09, 2008

## Schools get extra boost

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For the first time in almost 20 years, the state has a funding formula for education that will give Centre County's local school districts a slightly bigger financial boost than they've received from the state in recent years.

In Philipsburg-Osceola Area, the increase may mean the district can buy much-needed electrical upgrades at an elementary school and new textbooks. Both items were cut before the school board approved the final budget on June 30.

Under the state's 2008-09 budget, Bald Eagle Area, Bellefonte Area and Penns Valley Area should receive basic education funding increases of 3.09, 3.86 and 3.21 percent, respectively. School officials in those districts had planned for those increases in their final budgets.

Philipsburg-Osceola Area and State College Area should each get a 3 percent increase — slightly more than officials in each district had budgeted.

The increase means about \$91,863 more than budgeted for State College. And in P-O, the increase is about \$99,842 more the amount included in its \$25.8 million budget.

"Any excess funding will initially go into our fund balance until the district can agree upon a spending plan," P-O Director of Finance Michael Conte said.

Two items he said he would recommend are upgrades to the telephone and clock system for Osceola Mills Elementary School and textbooks.

"The telephones and clocks were eliminated (during budget negotiations)," Conte said. "The textbooks were reduced by \$100,000 in my budget."

In State College, the extra money may go straight into the district's fund balance, but no final decision has been made, according to Randy Brown, director of accounting.

"We don't have anything earmarked," he said. "At this point, we haven't discussed whether we would reopen the budget or just put that into the fund balance."

The extra money came during the state's budget negotiations, of which education funding was key topic.

In February, Gov. Ed Rendell had put forth a new education funding formula based on a 2007 costing-out study that recommended adequate funding levels for school districts statewide. The study was meant to make funding more equitable and ultimately raise student achievement.

The study meant that the districts that were found to be spending enough on education, such as State College, would get less state funding than districts that are not spending enough, according to the study.

As a result, State College was slated for only a 1.5 percent increase in its state funding. Overall, education funding would have increased \$291 million statewide under Rendell's proposed budget.

Citing concerns about Philadelphia's share and the state's ability to pay for the increase in the current economic downturn, Republican lawmakers, including Jake Corman, RBenner Township, supported a different education funding plan. They wanted to reduce the funding to \$175 million and nix the funding formula idea. But all districts, including State College, would have received at least a 2.5 percent increase.

In the end, the formula was approved for 2008-09. The General Assembly didn't commit to the funding formula for six years, as the governor proposed, but it agreed to the goal of injecting more funding for schools through 2013-14.

As part of the compromise, overall education funding was cut to \$275 million and the minimum increase per district went from 1.5 to 3 percent.

"Basically, there is less money collectively, but the minimum doubled," state Department of Education spokesman Michael Race said.

Other areas were trimmed, too. A funding increase for Classrooms for the Future, a state program that pays for laptops at area high schools, was reduced from Rendell's proposed \$90 million to \$45 million. The reduction will likely delay the ability for more high schools — such as Bellefonte — to join in for another year.

But for the first time in about two decades, the state has a "pure funding mechanism," Race said.

"Before it was driven by partly by politics, budget negotiations, money available," he said. "There really wasn't a way to direct state money to the districts that needed it most."

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