



Gov's plan could spell tax relief

By NATALIE WILLIS Staff writer

The governor's school funding plan could provide long-term property tax relief in every public school district across the state and help most the schools that have a proportionately high amount of their budget funded with local taxes.

Gov. Ed Rendell proposed a new school funding system in Pennsylvania that follows findings of the General Assembly's 2007 Costing-Out Study. The plan increases basic education investment by \$2.6 billion over six years with a cost-per-student focus. The goal is to bring the 32 percent of Pennsylvanian students below their grade level up to par by 2014.

The state's current school funding formula provides districts an annual increase in basic education funds based on the previous year's funding. If approved next month, the new system "would help distribute state resources to the students and schools that are most in need," according to the Education Law Center.

The costing-out study reinforces equity throughout the state by bringing school districts to adequate resource levels. This includes providing more funding to districts with the highest local taxes, in order to reduce the adequacy gap.

The current budget of Chambersburg Area School District carries a 4.07-mill property tax increase. CASD receives 32 percent of funding from the state and 65 percent from local property taxes. Three percent is from federal sources.

According to Rick Vensel, CASD business manager, the gap between state and local revenues has continually increased. Ten years ago, CASD received 42.15 percent of total revenue from state sources for the 1998-99 school year and 55.31 percent from local sources.

Property owners this year could face up to 4.7-mill tax increases in the Greencastle-Antrim School District, if school board members approve the current budget. In the Shippensburg Area School District, property taxes would go up 0.38 mills in Cumberland County and 1.21 mills in Franklin County. The state requires districts to finalize budgets by June 30.

The Education Law Center says the current funding system depends heavily upon local wealth, which accounts for 44 percent of total revenues to support schools, compared to the national average of 29 percent. ELC also summarized that the new budget proposal would support under-funded districts, which would receive \$291 million from the state the first year, and \$2.6 billion over six years.

In the governor's plan, 80 percent of state funding is to be invested in more class time, teacher training, new courses, class size reduction, pre- and full-day kindergarten and effective teachers, principals and superintendents.

Surrounding states have had major reforms after a costing-out studies similar to Pennsylvania's were conducted, according to the ELC. National experts discussed the education funding reform in a statewide media briefing. Professionals explained how the costing-out study has impacted New York, Maryland and other states, and expressed their views on the new school funding reform in Pennsylvania.

"I'm very optimistic," said Janis Risch, director of Good Schools Pennsylvania. "I think it is a great opportunity and comes directly as a result of organizing."

According to Michael Rebell, of Campaign for Educational Equity in New York, the proposal would raise expectations and give stability and predictability to school districts. He said he was realizing how much the proposal will relieve the pressure of increasing property taxes.

Though it supports the concept of Rendell's plan, The Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign suggested it be modified to account for special needs students. The PSFC also recommends strengthening the governor's proposal. The Campaign recommends: More state funding per student in districts with limited local wealth; assuring transition funding of 2 percent for all districts; and only applying additional accountability provisions to districts failing to meet adequate yearly progress.

Statewide, 576,000 students need to reach proficiency by 2014, one in six are at a "below basic" achievement level and another one in six have skills at the basic level, however are not at their grade level.

"Pennsylvania is proving that smart investment means higher achievement," Governor Rendell said during the first of many roundtable discussions he will have at schools across the state. "We must heed the General Assembly's Costing-Out Report so that the quality of our children's education does not depend on the zip code where they live."