

State official hoping for support for state budget

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EXETER - Supporters of state budgets proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell and the Pennsylvania Senate are looking for community support as the June 30 deadline for passing a 2009-10 budget looms.

Pennsylvania Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak stopped at Wyoming Area Secondary Center on Wednesday during a bus tour that includes stops in at least 12 districts to speak about the budgets and support for the governor's proposal.

Following the bus tour as it winds around the state was Commonwealth Foundation President and Chief Executive Officer Matthew Brouillette, who spoke on behalf of the Senate's proposal.

Dozens of community members, parents and representatives from local education agencies attended the 2 p.m. press conference, with more than a dozen sporting signs supporting Head Start early education. Zahorchak stressed the importance of keeping state funding up so programs and opportunities can continue for students and not be cut to make financial ends meet.

"One plan, the Senate's, takes out state money that was built up over the last â four years," he said. "Hundreds of millions of dollars of state funds gone, filled in with stimulus. In two years, that will go away. Some people talk about a cliff - that will cause a canyon and we will be spending years to come trying to fill it in."

He also said it was important to use the stimulus money to keep schools competitive and improving so Pennsylvania would be eligible for part of the \$5 billion in Race to the Top funds that will be given to top-performing schools.

"The (U.S.) secretary of education is very clear," Zahorchak said. "If you use the current stimulus dollars the way the Senate is proposing, tear up your form, don't bother to apply. If we use it and build upon strong programs we have as foundation, we have the momentum there and we have the leadership coming out of this state for education, and we could reap hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding."

Brouillette called the information "a misinformation campaign," and said that under the Senate proposal, no school district would receive an increase in state funding of less than 3 percent, and the average increase would be more than 11 percent.