

Proposed tax increases please education advocates

By: GARY WECKSELBLATT

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Bucks County education advocates rallied Friday in support of Gov. Ed Rendell's budget and income tax increase while taking shots at a Republican plan they claim would shortchange school districts.

"This is not the time to cut back on education in Pennsylvania because education is the key to our future," said Palisades School Board President Michael Lynch. "Cuts in state funding amount to a misleading sleight of hand - shifting the burden to local taxpayers who are already paying significant property taxes in a time of economic hardship."

Rendell has proposed a \$29.1 billion budget that includes a 16 percent hike in the personal income tax. It contrasts sharply with Senate Republicans, who passed their plan in May and amended it this week. They would spend \$27.1 million, a 3.6 percent cut from this year's \$28 billion budget, and not increase taxes.

"When you look all across Pennsylvania, every family is figuring out how to make ends meet," said Republican state Sen. Chuck McIlhinney of Bucks said earlier this week. "While they're going without we as a state government have to do the same.

"We don't have the money, and we shouldn't be taking more money out of people's pockets."

A key issue between the two sides is how the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or stimulus money, is spent.

Republicans are using it to fill a budget hole and increase education spending by 11 percent. Rendell prefers to use the stimulus for new programs and increase education funding by 19 percent.

"That money must be used to supplement and not supplant," said Lisa Andrejko, superintendent of Quakertown schools. "That's the true definition of stimulus. It cannot be used for current expenses."

Friday's speakers outside the Bucks County Courthouse said the Senate proposal for education spending would simply "pass the buck" from Harrisburg to local school boards, resulting in property tax increases and school programs cuts.

Calling the Republican budget a "farce," Bucks Democratic Commissioner Diane Marseglia said the GOP's plans for the stimulus was "illegal."

McIlhinney disagreed. "Once the federal government gives us the money it's ours to use as we see fit. Look, I get excited when I see a 3 percent increase for a program I like. At 11 percent I'm ecstatic," referring to the Republicans' proposed increase in education spending.

The actual wording of the ARRA states:

"To stabilize state and local government budgets, in order to minimize and avoid reductions in essential services and counterproductive state and local tax increases."

Republican state Rep. Marguerite Quinn, whose 143rd district includes portions of Central Bucks, Palisades and Pennridge school districts, said Rendell's income tax increase would cost her constituents \$28.2 million based on state department of education statistics based on 2006 income data. Under Rendell's spending plan those districts would receive a combined \$2.1 million more over the Republican plan.

"The numbers don't make sense," Quinn said. "I can't put up a vote to send \$28 million to Harrisburg to get \$2 million back for my district."

State Rep. Frank Farry, a Republican whose 142nd district includes the Neshaminy School District, had a similar complaint. He said his constituents would pay an additional \$9.7 million in taxes with an increased income tax and the district would only get back \$650,000.

"That math just doesn't work," he said.

Lynch, the Palisades school board president, said the income tax hike would be for "the greater good. The hammer approach is not what we need right now."

While education advocates were rallying in Bucks, Montgomery, Chester and Delaware counties, the last paycheck for the foreseeable future for tens of thousands of state government employees went out Friday.

Some 44,000 employees received 20 percent of their normal pay as the budget impasse since July 1 has stripped state government of the ability to pay bills and meet payroll.

About 1,000 employees of the judicial branch have gone unpaid since July 3, while legislative employees continue to be paid from reserve accounts.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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