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## \$118 million slashed in education funding

By ALEX ROSE [arose@delcotimes.com](mailto:arose@delcotimes.com)

It doesn't take much around this time of year to get Charlotte Hummel, a member of the William Penn School Board, hopping mad at the state Legislature.

But Wednesday's vote by the Republican-controlled state Senate to cut \$118 million from the proposed basic education funding for next year had the Lansdowne Democrat "furious."

"I just thought they were going to vote it down or tweak it, but for them to cut the way they have, it's Draconian," said Hummel.

The cuts, voted in 28-21 along party lines, were just part of more than \$457 million the Senate cut from Gov. Ed Rendell's overall spending plan of \$28.3 billion for 2008-09, which represents a 4.3 percent increase over this year. That plan was amended last week by the House Appropriations Committee to \$28.5 billion, an increase of 4.8 percent.

The Senate-approved plan would still increase spending by 2.8 percent to \$27.9 billion, but Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi, R-9, of Chester, explained Wednesday a murky economic outlook requires some fiscal restraint.

"These changes are necessary in large part because we have a disappearing projected surplus in this current 2007-08 fiscal year and declining revenues for the next fiscal year," he said.

"I think the governor was certainly disappointed in the vote," Rendell spokesman Chuck Ardo said Thursday. "He believes it is bad for both the children's education and for homeowners who will have to compensate through property taxes for the loss of state revenue. We are hopeful that a compromise can be reached on the budget that will restore funding for education."

Education was the biggest item to take a cut at about 40 percent, down to \$173 million from \$291 million — still a 3.5 percent increase over last year.

But Hummel said districts like hers are barley limping along as it is, and can't be expected to craft a realistic budget under bare-bones conditions at the 11th hour.

Citing a recent statewide "costing out" study that found 93 percent of Pennsylvania school districts spend less per-pupil than they should — including

12 of Delco's 15 districts — Hummel said the Senate is committing "educational apartheid" with this vote.

"I just can't believe they're willing to cut these kids throats," she said. "Those people should lose their jobs. I don't know how they sleep at night or look at themselves in the mirror. I just don't know."

State Rep. Nicholas Micozzie, R-163, of Upper Darby, said he was also disappointed with the Senate's vote and drafted a letter urging his fellow legislators to craft a "permanent, adequate, equitable and predictable" school-funding formula as part of the 2008-2009 budget.

"My concern is that we need to do something on two fronts: We need to reform education and we also need to reform the way we fund public education," he said Thursday.

Micozzie, who has been pushing his own education bill in the state House for years, joined Rendell and Democratic legislators last month in Ridley to support the governor's plan for a multi-year education-spending boost.

"A lot of kids in the William Penn School District and other areas are falling through the cracks," he said. "There has to be enough money that every child in Pennsylvania can have the opportunity to have a good education."

Pennsylvania Department of Education spokeswoman Sheila Ballen said Thursday there is a sense the House of Representatives would be more in line with the governor's figures.

Senate Republican spokesman Erik Arneson said talks were continuing Thursday, and that the education team had met again to work on a solution.

"They are exploring options and trying to come to an agreement both on the overall amount of the basic education funding increase and the formula for how that would be distributed," he said.

While there is still work to do before the June 30 deadline to adopt a state budget, Arneson made it clear nothing had yet arisen that couldn't be hashed out.

"There's no sense here that (Thursday's) vote was anything but productive in terms of advancing the process," he said. "This was not the Senate trying to throw down a gauntlet or anything like that. This was very much a step in a process."

"We know that there's much more work to do, we're eager to get that work done and come up with something that everybody will agree to in the end."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.