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Delco schools waiting as Legislature debates funding

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As the clock ticks for Gov. Ed Rendell and the state Legislature to finalize a new state budget, officials from Delaware County's 15 school districts are watching the negotiations in Harrisburg with bated breath.

A plan put forth by the state Senate would roll back state money for basic education and use \$728.8 million of federal stimulus dollars to keep funding at the 2008-2009 level of \$5.3 billion.

Under Senate Bill 850, each district would receive the same amount of basic education funding as it received in 2008-2009, but would face cuts in Title 1 and special-education funding. The bill proposes the use of federal stimulus money to close gaps or provide overall increases in the areas that face cuts.

But Rendell and several school superintendents in the county have complained that once federal stimulus dollars dry up, school districts would be forced to make up the state funding deficit by raising property taxes.

Rendell cautioned the budget plan approved by Senate Republicans May 6 would force school districts to hike property taxes and cut programs. He said this would ultimately put the state \$1.2 billion behind the goals established in law last year as part of a six-year school funding formula.

Even U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has spoken out against the senate's plan. In a letter to Rendell, Duncan wrote that SB 850, the education funding proposal, "would cause him to look negatively at any application from Pennsylvania for federal funds or other competition grants."

State Sen. Dominic Pileggi, the Senate majority leader, said there is misinformation spinning throughout the education community about the Senate's plan.

Pileggi, R-9, of Chester, said the use of federal stimulus money to maintain basic

education funding at current levels will actually provide school districts statewide with significant increases in funding. He pointed out that other states have used stimulus money the same way.

“If we are unable to use (federal stimulus) funds in this manner, Pennsylvania will be forced to make drastic cuts to other programs or, under Gov. Rendell’s formulation, to increase the personal income tax by \$1.5 billion,” Pileggi said.

In letters to U.S. Sens. Arlen Specter and Robert P. Casey Jr., D-Pa., Pileggi, said Duncan’s position that he will penalize the state for using federal stimulus funds to maintain support for basic education “appears designed to pressure the General Assembly into enacting an increase” in the state’s personal income tax.

Lt. Gov./Sen. Joseph Scarnati, president pro tempore, Pileggi and the chairmen of the appropriations and education committees, earlier this month sent a letter to the superintendents and school boards to clear up “points of misinformation” regarding SB 850.

The senators pointed out that federal regulations for stimulus funds dictate these funds should be invested in ways that do not result in unsustainable, continuing commitments after the funding expires. They noted SB 850 does not cut the basic education subsidy as some have indicated and maintains the \$1 billion in special education subsidy.

The senators also called the argument “illogical” that enactment of the Senate’s budget plan would inevitably lead to sizeable school property tax increases at the local level. Instead, the bill would provide most school districts with hundreds of thousands of dollars in increased state/federal funding over last year.

‘A precarious position’

But Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, a network of state citizens pushing for adequate education funding, says although the Senate’s plan was rejected, school districts would be in a tough predicament if a similar plan was revived. Risch said under the Senate’s plan, state funding for all school districts would be rolled back to 2005-06 levels and students in the most financially distressed communities would take the hardest hit.

According to charts produced by Good Schools Pennsylvania, the Chester Upland School District would see a \$930 cut per student in state funding or 16 percent cut in its state education subsidy. Southeast Delco School District would receive a \$847 cut per student or 26 percent cut in its state subsidy, while William Penn would get a \$659 cut or 20 percent cut in its state subsidy. Upper Darby, the largest district in the county with 11,788 students, would see a \$632 cut per student or 28 percent cut in its state subsidy.

“This disproportionate cut in state funding will put many of the poorest school districts in a precarious position,” Risch said. “They will face great difficulties.”

