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Gov. Ed Rendell's Education Budget: A Formula for Success/"Seize this Opportunity" Immediate Impact on Reading, Upper Darby & Philadelphia

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Philadelphia – Among the chief findings of the "Costing-Out" study is that the average funding for each student in Pennsylvania should be \$8,355. Citing data from prior efforts of the Rendell administration, along with the current budget plan, Secretary Cooper highlighted the efforts of the administration in closing the "adequacy-gap."

The Secretary, however, was equally focused on the goal of having all 1.8 million Pennsylvania students reach grade level proficiency at reading and math by 2014, as mandated by No Child Left Behind.

Moreover, she went on to suggest that Legislators and education advocates "not fight over the minutia" of the plan, and emphasized the accountability component of the proposal. The new plan is structured to ensure that "money is actually being used to assist students who are furthest from proficiency."

Since taking office in 2003 Gov. Rendell's administration and the state Legislature have increased public education funding by \$1.8 billion; and in the process transformed the state from one of nine offering no Pre-K service to providing more than one-third (21,000) of eligible children access to Pre-K. In addition, the Governor expanded full-day kindergarten funding to cover nearly two-thirds of all eligible children.

Secretary Cooper expounded on these advances and others, citing some of the innovative programs introduced under Gov. Rendell, including "Classrooms for the Future," which placed laptops on the desks of students in hundreds of Pennsylvania High Schools and enhanced the training of teachers to utilize technology in classrooms. Another program, "Science: It's Elementary" has had great success in elevating the science acumen among elementary school children. "We are continually trying to transform" the classroom," said Ms. Cooper.

While other states, from New Jersey to California, are facing budget deficits and are compelled to rein in spending; under the Governor's proposed new school funding formula, Pennsylvania's 501 school districts will share a \$291.3 million increase in funding.

Among the specific programs benefiting from the 2008-09 budget: the Pre-K Counts initiative will increase 16.7 percent to over \$12 million, and Science: It's Elementary" will increase by 11.1 percent to \$1.5 million.

The 5.9 percent increase is considered the first installment of the new funding formula which is allocated, as Secretary Cooper noted, according to the distance each district is from reaching "their adequacy targets," as well as the local tax burden.

The Philadelphia School district, for example, will receive a 9.6 percent increase; while some other local districts, such as Upper Darby will receive a 22 percent increase in funds and neighboring Norristown will get a 17 percent boost.

Although thirty-six of Pennsylvania's districts are providing more resources for their students than required by the Costing-Out study; 93 percent of the state's School districts have less resources than necessary to aid each student reach grade level. The largest funding gap was found in the Reading School District - which is serving an increasingly Latino student population- provides \$6,033 per student.

In response to concerns raised by a principal from a district receiving only a 1.5 percent increase in funding this year, Secretary Cooper explained that the initial phase of the new funding plan "accelerated" allotments to specific areas to hasten their progress towards reaching "adequacy targets." For those districts receiving the minimum 1.5 percent increase, Secretary Cooper assured them of more hefty increases in the future.

"The people furthest from their (adequacy) target and (with) the highest tax effort get their money first," she added.

Secretary Cooper voiced some concerns over the fact that, despite the "needs" of the state's largest school district, Philadelphia's \$85 million portion of the \$291 million increase would create what she referred to as "optics issues," among some state Legislators. She concluded optimistically, however, foreseeing that the new funding formula also opened a "political alignment" between Pennsylvania's rapidly growing districts and the poorest districts.

C.E.O. For Philadelphia Schools: Dr. Ackerman

The recent appointment of Dr. Arlene Ackerman as the C.E.O. of the Philadelphia School District prompted some comments among those attending the EPLC session.

"I'm looking forward to working with her," said Alfredo Calderón, Executive Director of Aspira, which is about to open a second K-8 bilingual charter school. "We're hoping that she is a leader with a vision" and will help the children in the "Latino community."

While they were aware of the contentious relationship Dr. Ackerman had with some members of San Francisco's School Board, both Shelly Yanoff, Director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth and Deborah Wei, of Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter agreed, "She certainly has the background and credentials. The decision was made and we're moving forward."

"This is a once in a generation opportunity to fix the (Pennsylvania) School Budget system and to leave some decent legacy for kids," asserted Ron Crowell, President of the "Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) of Pennsylvania.

Addressing a gathering of teachers, Principals and education advocates from around the state, Mr. Crowell's assessment was part of a critical analysis undertaken by educators, at a Thursday morning policy forum on the "Education Budget," recently proposed by Governor Ed Rendell.

While Mr. Crowell conceded that the Governor's education budget was not as generous as many had hoped; "This is our best opportunity to do something significant, in terms of fixing a very unfair state-wide school funding (system)."

"We were last in this kind of position when Gov. (Milton) Shapp was in office and our state share of (education funding) was 55 percent," added Mr. Crowell. "We've been going downhill since then."

The principal speaker of the forum, Donna Cooper, the Pennsylvania Secretary of Policy and Planning, echoed Mr. Crowell's sentiments and urged the "education community" to "seize the opportunity" to support the Governor's Six-Year plan.

Based on a historic "Costing-Out" Report commissioned by the bipartisan leadership of the state's General Assembly; the Governor's six-year Education proposal recommends an increased investment of \$2.6 billion, to be phased in over a six year period. Within six years, under the Governor's plan, the Commonwealth's share of funding for education would eventually reach 44 percent.