

## State budget boosts public schools

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Erie School District schools Superintendent Jim Barker expects the state's new \$28.3 billion budget to pay for plenty of reading, writing, arithmetic -- and computers.

Public schools were among the big winners in the budget passed by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Ed Rendell over the weekend.

"This is really a great day for public education in the whole commonwealth," said Barker, whose school system will see its basic education funding increase by \$2.7 million, or 5.89 percent in the coming year.

The spending plan will also borrow to invest heavily in infrastructure improvements to replace deficient bridges, upgrade water and sewer systems, and developing alternative energy.

"Working with legislative leaders of both parties, we hammered out a far-reaching compromise that propels Pennsylvania forward in tough economic times," Rendell said when he signed the budget Friday.

"I can live with it," said state Sen. Jane Earll, of Fairview Township, on Monday, calling the spending plan "reasonable and responsible."

Earll, R-49th Dist., said the budget met the goals of her Senate Republican caucus -- it avoided a tax increase and kept spending below the rate of inflation. She also said the plan will borrow for worthwhile infrastructure improvements.

In fact, Earll sponsored the accompanying H2O-PA legislation, which provides for the investment of \$800 million in state gambling funds that the budget will make toward improving municipal water and sewer systems.

Erie County's other state senator, Mary Jo White, of Franklin, R-21st Dist., spearheaded the legislation that provides for the budget's \$650 million investment in alternative energy development.

But the biggest bump in the budget itself is for education.

The budget boosts statewide basic education funding by 5.5 percent -- to \$5.23 billion. It also distributes millions more through other educational programs.

The increase to Erie schools is about what was expected, and was plugged into the new budget, Barker said.

"This is what we anticipated and planned on," Barker said.

Barker said the state budget does more than increase money to the local district -- it creates a funding formula that helps equalize educational opportunity.

"For the first time in two decades, it is saying that a ZIP code of a student should not determine his or her educational opportunity," Barker said.

The budget reflects a new school funding formula that was outlined in February, said Michael Race, deputy press secretary with the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Race said the idea was to adjust the formula so that poor districts, districts with high poverty rates and districts heavily burdened with tax exempt properties can more closely match the per-student spending needed to insure academic success.

State Rep. Pat Harkins, of Erie, D-1st Dist., pointed to the budget's allocations to local school districts in announcing his support.

"The point is that we are seeing steady increases to basic and special-education programs, and that bodes well for current and future students," Harkins said.

Other districts -- such as Crawford Central in the Meadville area -- adopted their budgets without knowing that the budget would include a minimum 3 percent increase in basic education.

Crawford Central schools Superintendent Mike Dolecki said his district was banking on only a 1.5 percent subsidy increase. The district instead got 3 percent more.

Nevertheless, the budget had its supporters and detractors Monday.

The Hospital & Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania expressed relief that the budget included funding to support the state's burn centers, hospital/neonatal services and rural critical access hospitals.

The Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, meanwhile, pointed to what it called a "troubling trend" of funding cuts to agricultural research and technology programs that benefit farmers.

Earll said the budget preserves funding for ports, like the Port of Erie, which officials feared might take a cut this year.

State Rep. John Hornaman, of Millcreek Township, D-3rd Dist., said he is proud of the budget's initiatives to develop alternative energy. Those measures will provide loans, grants and rebates for conservation products and projects, geothermal and wind-energy projects and technology. It will also give the state's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program an extra \$40 million.

State Rep. John Evans, of Sadsbury Township, R-5th Dist., praised the new budget and the investment it makes not only to public school districts in the region, but to colleges like Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

But state Rep. Brad Roae, from Crawford County's East Mead Township, didn't like what he saw.

"I could not support an irresponsible budget that has a potential \$1 billion deficit," said Roae, R-6th Dist. "The plan assumes that the Pennsylvania economy will grow at 3 percent this fiscal year and result in 3 percent higher tax collections. The past fiscal year only saw a 1.7 percent growth in tax revenue."

Roae said he believes the new budget cuts too close.

"We had about \$115 million of carry-over this year for the budget, but would have only \$5 million for the 2009-2010 budget," Roae said.

Earll, meanwhile, said she was also concerned about any economic slowdown that could cut

revenue.

"We are going to have to keep a close eye on that," she said. "We are going to have to pay attention closely to how revenues are coming."

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Education funding amount and the percentage increase in the 2008-09 state budget:

Erie County:

- Corry Area School District, \$12.35 million, up 4.22 percent.
- Erie School District, \$48.85 million, up 5.89 percent.
- Fairview School District, \$2.83 million, up 3.22 percent.
- Fort LeBoeuf School District, \$6.39 million, up 5.11 percent.
- General McLane School District, \$10.07 million, up 3 percent.
- Girard School District, \$7.78 million, up 6.1 percent.
- Harbor Creek School District, \$8.43 million, up 3 percent.
- Iroquois School District, \$7.59 million, up 6.83 percent.
- Millcreek Township School District, \$12.45 million, up 4.52 percent.
- North East School District, \$8.18 million, up 3 percent.
- Northwestern School District, \$8.71 million, up 3.52 percent.
- Union City Area School District, \$8.49 million, up 3 percent.
- Wattsburg Area School District, \$6.43 million, up 3 percent.

Crawford County:

- Conneaut School District, \$10.55 million, up 3 percent.
- Crawford Central School District, \$14.75 million, up 3 percent.
- Penncrest School District, \$18.11 million, up 3 percent.