



More money for area schools

State increases aid for education by nearly \$6 million.

Tuesday, July 08, 2008

By SARA K. SATULLO

The Express-Times

Northampton County's public schools will see an increase of \$5.84 million in state aid under the budget Gov. Ed Rendell signed into law Friday.

But school officials say the real news isn't the dollar figure. It's the establishment of a reliable funding formula for the first time in nearly two decades.

The funding formula, part of Rendell's K-12 education initiative, guarantees every district at least a 3 percent increase in state aid.

Bethlehem Area School Board President Loretta Leeson called the budget a school-funding revolution. The cash-strapped district is seeing a \$1.94 million boost, although it's unclear if there are restrictions. "Bethlehem is one of the winners in this scenario, and I believe almost 60 percent of districts are winners in this scenario," Leeson said.

The state study used to create the formula found the state is underfunding public education by more than \$4 billion and that poorer communities were shouldering the highest tax burdens, said Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, a nonprofit that advocates for equitable school funding.

"For the first time in nearly two decades a school funding formula was used that is rational and begins to address the inequities experienced by students in poorer communities," Risch said.

The formula recognized that urban, suburban and rural districts all have different challenges, she said. It calculated what the state's share of funding should be based on each district's circumstances.

The range of disparity is reflected in Northampton County. Saucon Valley is seeing a 3 percent increase compared with a nearly 13 percent increase in comparably sized Bangor Area.

"Rural districts really don't have the tax base," said formula supporter John Reynolds, who chairs the Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley and is a Moravian College professor. "They don't have industrial parks and that type of thing to support the increased funding necessary to meet the adequacy level.

"School districts that tend to be wealthier have a tax base that permits them to raise their resources more easily than some of the other communities," he said.

Saucon Valley ranks first in per pupil spending in Northampton County and has the highest tax rate. But the state's costing-out study argued it was the only county district spending what it needed to meet educational standards by 2014.

"They do so because they have the resources to do so," Reynolds said, adding districts such as Saucon Valley have the opportunity for more development and potential to raise more revenue than places such as Easton Area.

For Bethlehem Area, the formula acknowledges the challenges it faces by being both suburban and urban. The district is getting more disadvantaged students each year, has more students transferring between districts and is educating more English as a second language students, Leeson said.

"We are told we have over 20 languages spoken in our school district," Bethlehem Area School Board Vice President Judith Dexter said. "It is challenging from an education standpoint."

Reynolds said there needs to be continued attention to such issues in the long term but the state-aid formula is a good step.

"I think it will be good for children," he said. "I don't think there's any question that the general principle that the quality of a child's education depended on the ZIP code where they were born was a huge problem."

Reporter Sara K. Satullo can be reached at 610-867-5000 or by e-mail at ssatullo@express-times.com.