

School districts face funding questions

By Angie Oravec, Herald-Standard

06/22/2009

Updated 06/21/2009 09:15:16 PM EDT

Property tax increases or major program cuts?

That may be a question many school districts could face if a plan similar to Senate Bill 850 is revived, according to legislators and representatives of leading education advocacy agencies. With the state budget still unsettled and budget talks possibly continuing into July or August, Sen. Richard Kasunic, D-Dunbar, said if the bill would become law, school boards and the county commissioners would be faced with raising taxes.

It also would create "major problems" for school districts in two years when stimulus funding dries up. The bill, the final passage of which Kasunic voted against, used federal stimulus dollars to make up for a decrease in state basic education funding.

"Where does that leave us in 2011 when the stimulus money is gone?" asked Kasunic, who voted against the bill's final passage. "If we don't do the responsible, the right thing, everybody's life is going to be affected by this."

Kasunic, along with several education advocates, spoke Friday as part of a community/legislative forum sponsored by the Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign.

At the core of the discussion was Senate Bill 850.

The bill included severe cuts in state funding for Head Start/Early Head Start, libraries and would return state aid for public schools to 2005-06 levels, turning backwards on a six-year plan to slowly increase school districts' basic education subsidy until it reaches a level that adequately funds public education as determined by a 2008 Costing-Out Study.

Ron Cowell, who spearheaded the Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign, said a "serious problem" exists with how public education is funded and if that problem can be addressed through raising the personal income tax, as recently proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell, then the campaign supports it.

Cowell pointed to 2006-07 numbers, which showed state funding to support public schools at 36.2 percent, 11.4 percent below the national average, while communities' local share to support public schools was 56.5 percent, 12.6 percent higher than the national average.

"The realization is that when the state is cheap, local dollars pay the bill," said Cowell.

The Senate bill, he said, would "kill the six-year plan" and push back Pennsylvania to two years ago when "no plan, no commitment, funding system" was in place and stimulus money should be used for education spending.

"If we use stimulus money to supplant state money, we are going backwards," said Cowell. "If you keep on track with the (six-year) plan (to increase education funding), then we will be in a prime position."

For Fayette County, funding for Classrooms for the Future, dual enrollment and Science: It's Elementary - programs that both teachers, students and elected officials have said are effective - would be eliminated under the bill, according to Andrew Musiolowski, director of finance for the Intermediate Unit 1, which services public schools in Fayette, Greene and Washington counties.

Fayette County's six school districts also would be receiving a higher bill for charter school costs, which the state now reimburses districts about 30 percent, because the bill would further cut that percentage, Musiolowski said.

The state will also lose out on a portion of the \$5 billion in "Race to the Top" funds, which the federal government is expected to be distributed to states this fall based on how well the state used the first round of stimulus funding, according to Musiolowski.

"If we use these funds to merely maintain the status quo, we'll lose out and so will our children," said Musiolowski.

John Pechunka, director of the western Pennsylvania field office for the Pennsylvania State Education Association, said a 20 percent property tax increase would be needed for school districts to maintain funding in all programs cut under the bill.

"School funding is not an area of the budget for which we can wait for better economic times," said Pechunka. "We can't put the children of today on hold with the promise of more funding in the future."

Sonya Over, business manager for the Uniontown Area School District, said school districts' "hands are tied" with regulations in effect under Act 1 of 2006, which limits the amount districts can increase taxes without a voter referendum. A statewide tax increase must happen to help fund education or "it won't happen," said Over.

For school districts like Brownsville Area, already feeling the financial pinch, special needs programs could be cut initially, while curriculum as well as cuts in staffing could be on the chopping block next if state funding is cut significantly, said Dr. Philip Savini, Brownsville Area School District superintendent.

"It's not the inefficiency of the school districts, it's what happens above us," Savini said.