

Rendell boosts school funding

Intelligencer Journal

Published: Feb 06, 2008

02:02 EST

Harrisburg

By BRIAN WALLACE, Staff

Lancaster County public schools are in line for a hefty 5.6 percent increase in state funding as part of a proposed \$28.3 billion 2008-09 [budget](#) outlined Tuesday by Gov. [Ed Rendell](#).

The increases would range from a low of 3 percent for [Solanco School District](#) to almost 17 percent for [School District of Lancaster](#), boosting state support for county public schools by nearly \$11 million next year.

How much money actually makes its way to the schools' coffers won't be determined until the Legislature approves a final [budget](#) this summer.

But Rendell's proposal is a significant first step in increasing state support for public [education](#) in response to a study that found Pennsylvania schools fall \$4.4 billion short of what they need to spend to successfully educate their students.

Several elements of that "costing-out" study, released in November, were included in the [education budget](#) proposal, which increases statewide basic [education](#) subsidies by \$291 million, or 6 percent — the largest hike in nearly 20 years.

The [budget](#) also calls for boosting special-[education](#) funding by 3 percent, increasing prekindergarten spending by 17 percent and providing an additional \$36.3 million — a 22.5 percent increase — for [charter school tuition](#) reimbursements.

SDL would get a whopping 16.9 percent increase in its basic [education](#) subsidy, which would rise from \$38.6 million this year to \$45.1 million in 2008-09.

[Columbia Borough School District's](#) subsidy would jump by 9.3 percent, and Conestoga Valley's would rise by 6.4 percent. In addition to Solanco, Hempfield, Ephrata Area and Manheim Central would get the lowest increases — around 3 percent each.

Overall, county districts would get an additional \$10.9 million in basic [education](#) subsidies. For 2007-08, the schools got an additional \$7.6 million in state [education](#) funding from all sources — not just subsidies. Acting SDL superintendent [Stephen Iovino](#), in an e-mail, praised the state for using elements of the costing-out study "to reduce the reliance on local [property taxes](#)" and "moving toward improving the fairness in the distribution of [tax](#) efforts across [school districts](#)."

To determine 2008-09 subsidies, the state Department of [Education](#) used a new formula that established an "adequacy target" for each [school district](#).

[Education](#) officials started with the base funding amount recommended for all schools in the costing-out study — \$8,003 per pupil — and adjusted it for inflation to \$8,335.

They then increased the base amount by 43 percent for each low-income student and 164 percent for those with limited English proficiency. Funding also was increased for smaller districts and adjusted up or down to reflect disparities in the cost of living for different regions of the state.

Once the adequacy target was determined for each district, the department compared that number with the amount districts spent per pupil in 2006-07. The difference is the district's "adequacy gap."

Of Pennsylvania's 501 [school districts](#), 465 were found to have an adequacy gap.

In Lancaster County, the gap ranges from \$1,573 per pupil in [Manheim Township School District](#) to \$5,133 per pupil in SDL. The county average is \$2,427.

To narrow that gap statewide, the Department of [Education](#) wants to increase state [education](#) funding by \$2.6 billion over six years. The 2008-09 [budget](#) is the first year in that effort.

State Rep. [Mike Sturla](#), a [Democrat](#) from Lancaster city, praised the proposal, saying the 2008-09 [budget](#) is a sign of Rendell's commitment to creating a more equitable school funding system.

"We need to invest in the future," he said. "The long-term health of the state is paramount here."

But [Republican legislators](#) — and some local school officials — are less than enthusiastic.

"I try not to get too excited until we see what happens at a later date, when (Rendell) and the Legislature get serious about passing a [budget](#)," [Robert Frick](#), Lampeter-Strasburg superintendent, said in an e-mail.

State Rep. [John Bear](#), a [Republican](#) from Lititz, called the [education budget](#) "excessive" and said he favors spending increases closer to the rate of inflation, about 3 percent to 3.5 percent.

"We have a long way to go to see what we end up with," he said.

Solanco superintendent [Martin Hudacs](#) criticized the formula used to determine the state subsidies.

His district has the third-biggest adequacy gap in the county, at \$2,975 per student, but is in line for the smallest subsidy increase.

Hudacs said the state rewards districts with high [tax](#) rates and penalizes those with lower [taxes](#), like Solanco, which has the lowest millage rate in the county.

The formula assumes that lower [tax](#) rates translate to wealth, but that's not the case in Solanco, which Hudacs said has a stagnant [tax](#) base.

"We're really disappointed by this," he said. "We'll continue to do a great job with the resources we have, but the state missed its chance to help us out."

E-mail: bwallace@Inpnews.com