

A rolling debate over school funding comes to Emmaus

State education secretary, trailed by a critic, says GOP plan is nothing but trouble.

By Patrick Lester | OF THE MORNING CALL

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[Emmaus](#) High School hosted a skirmish Wednesday in an ongoing statewide war of words over competing proposals on paying for public education after June 30.

State Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak's five-day bus tour stopped at the school to plug Gov. Ed Rendell's budget and blast a Senate Republican budget he says will lead to painful school program cuts and property tax hikes.

Close behind was Matthew Brouillette, chief executive officer of the Commonwealth Foundation, a Harrisburg-based think tank. Brouillette is trailing Zahorchak across the state to accuse the secretary of a waging a taxpayer-funded misinformation campaign.

At the heart of the debate is federal stimulus money and how the state proposes spending it. [Republicans](#) would eliminate the basic education funding increase and supplant it with federal money, Zahorchak said. Rendell and the [Democrats](#) want to maintain a state funding increase and supplement it with stimulus funds.

With the backdrop of a recession that has the state dealing with a \$3.2 billion deficit for this fiscal year and a June 30 budget deadline looming, Zahorchak told dozens of teachers, students and child care center employees that Rendell's \$28.9 billion budget proposal "ramps up" the state's share of education cost.

Zahorchak derided a \$27.4 billion Senate Republican-backed budget. He said that by cutting state education funding and filling the gap with federal cash, the state would be setting property owners up to fill a \$728 million hole when stimulus funds expire in two years. He said the plan also includes drastic cuts to Head Start and other pre-kindergarten initiatives.

The Democrat-majority House Appropriations Committee this week rejected the proposal along party lines.

Zahorchak said the GOP plan "would have dire consequences for homeowners, students and the economic well-being of the commonwealth."

He said if the state chooses to use stimulus money as the Senate Republicans propose, it could risk losing a shot at a piece of \$5 billion the federal government will make available to states based on how well they use the money to boost student achievement.

Brouillette said the Senate Republican plan represents an appropriate use of stimulus funds, which he said could be used to minimize cuts in services and local tax increases.

"This money is to be used to stave off the recession," Brouillette said before a brief argument with Michael Race, the Department of Education's communications director. Brouillette said any future

funding gaps can be filled in when the economy improves.

He said the Senate Republican plan provides school districts with average funding increases of 11.7 percent and that the East Penn School District would see a 10.7 percent increase in basic and special education funding.

He and House Democrats say the Rendell plan would require a personal income tax hike.

Rendell aides couldn't say how much the bus tour is costing taxpayers, saying expenses include gas and hotel stays.