

Education funding a casualty amid state budget talks

GOP-led Senate cuts nearly \$118 million out of Rendell plan.

By Kari Andren | Special to The Morning Call

June 19, 2008

| The Republican-controlled state Senate on Wednesday put down its marker in this year's budget debate, passing a spending plan that slashed nearly \$118 million in basic education funding proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell.

Senate [GOP](#) leaders insisted the 28-21 party-line vote was merely an attempt to meet a June 30 deadline to pass a new state budget and not an effort to derail negotiations between legislative leaders and the governor's office.

The Senate-approved plan would increase spending by 2.8 percent to \$27.9 billion for the fiscal year that starts July 1. The plan cuts more than \$457 million from the governor's proposal announced in February.

Rendell's spending plan, as amended last week by the House Appropriations Committee, is \$28.5 billion, an increase of 4.8 percent over current spending.

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Gibson Armstrong, R-[Lancaster](#), called the Senate budget "a reasonable and responsible start."

Other Republican lawmakers argued the cuts were necessary because the state's projected budget surplus was \$150 million less than expected.

Spokesmen for Sen. Vince Fumo, D-[Philadelphia](#), and Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi, R-[Delaware](#), said the move is just part of the ongoing budget discussions.

Starting point or not, the Senate's decision to trim education spending angered the Rendell administration, which has made increasing education funding one of its budget-season priorities.

State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak said the Senate bill flies in the face of a study the Legislature did on necessary funding for education.

"The Senate Republican bill is a recipe for more of the same: local property tax increases and insufficient resources for [Pennsylvania](#)'s students," Zahorchak said in a written statement Wednesday.

Armstrong said enough money is dedicated to education for every school district to see a sizable increase from last year, but Democrats are not convinced.

"A cursory glance says to us that if [Senate Republicans] are trying to be lean and mean, they've succeeded," said Johnna Pro, spokeswoman for House Appropriations Committee Chairman

Dwight Evans, D-Philadelphia.

The House is slated to vote on its version of the budget next week. The final shape of the spending plan will be the result of negotiations between Rendell and legislative leaders.

Kari Andren is a summer intern for the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents Association.

Copyright © 2008, *The Morning Call*