

## **Budget battle**

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WEST NORRITON — The library of the Marshall Street Elementary School was decorated Friday afternoon with the traditional props for a rally — festive balloons, printed signs depicting the rally's theme and a live microphone for a parade of earnest educators and politicians.

“Keep Property Taxes Down” said one sign. “Stand up for Schools” was imprinted onto a mock classroom chalkboard.

State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak praised Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed fiscal 2009 education budget, lambasted an alternate funding plan embodied in state Senate Bill 850 and cheerfully accepted a birthday cake from the school district.

Zahorchak's 52nd birthday was Friday and the students in the pre-kindergarten class sang an enthusiastic “Happy Birthday” as Zahorchak kneeled to bring his face to eye level with the 4-year-olds. He accepted an oversized birthday card decorated with every class member's signature.

“Education is an economic stimulus tool. It is the No. 1 economic development tool,” Zahorchak said. “Educated workers make a good living. We (America) are not keeping pace with other countries in science and math. We need to recapture our No. 1 position.”

The elementary school appearance was the 16th and last stop by Zahorchak during a five-day statewide publicity tour for the education budget.

“Adequate funding of our schools is always crucial, but perhaps never more so than during difficult economic times like these,” he said. “The path we take in Pennsylvania's education budget will determine whether we continue to build on our success or we stagnate while other states and nations move ahead.”

Zahorchak criticized SB 850 for eliminating a \$418 million state-wide increase in basic education funding and eliminating \$317 million in federal stimulus funding for school modernization and educational improvement strategies. He said the Senate bill would cut \$336 million from the pre-K to Grade 12 budget including cuts to charter school reimbursement, pre-kindergarten, Head Start and high school reform.

“We need your help,” Zahorchak said. “We are allowed to have voices in a democracy. Call your legislators.”

Gov. Ed Rendell and the state legislature are entering the final two weeks of the current budget without an agreement on two conflicting spending and taxation plans. The state budget deadline is June 30, but in the past six years, the new budget has never been adopted on time.

Norristown Education Association President Lee Speers echoed Zahorchak’s theme.

“The residents are doing their fair share,” Speers said. “The General Assembly needs to keep their promises. School funding is not something that can be forgotten or skipped over.”

Norristown Superintendent Janet Samuels called SB 850 “a direct threat to our district. We clearly need to stand up and make our voices heard. There is no need for gimmicks in budgeting.”

Upper Dublin School Board President Mike Paston said the Senate bill would slice “nearly \$300,000” from the Upper Dublin district budget.

“When times are tough you don’t cut resources to schools,” Paston said. “We raised our real estate taxes 16 percent to build a new high school.”

State Rep. Matthew Bradford, D-70th Dist., asked, “Are we going to invest in our children? For me, it’s a no-brainer.”

Bradford warned, “If the state retreats from spending, that is when the conversation about (local) property taxes will rear its head.”

State Rep. Mike Vereb, R-150th Dist., who noted he had played basketball at the elementary school, urged the state legislature to “open up the leadership accounts and open up the (state) surpluses” to help balance the fiscal 2009 budget.

“We have to make sure the funding formulas are fair,” Vereb said. “Education is important to me.”

An audience of about 75 educators and parents in the audience, including Norristown Area School Board President Janice Pearce, listened attentively to the short speeches and enthusiastically applauded.

Pearce warned the district would have to impose larger class sizes, increase local real estate taxes and trim special programming.

“This is not the fault of the child. It is not the fault of the teachers. It is not the

community's fault," Pearce said. "It is the state's fault. We need to put a face on Norristown."