

## Rendell pushes hard for education funds

by JAN MURPHY, Of The Patriot-News  
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Gov. Ed Rendell wants the state to begin a six-year journey to boost Pennsylvania's share of funding for public schools by \$2.6 billion, and his 2008-09 budget represents a first step toward that goal.

The governor's \$11.8 billion education budget provides for a \$291 million increase to school districts for regular education. If approved by lawmakers, it would be the largest one-year increase in basic education support in more than two decades.

He also proposes a new formula for distributing this new money, in response to a recent independent study that found public schools in Pennsylvania were underfunded by \$4.4 billion.

"We know this is a historic commitment by the state saying the \$2.6 billion is coming for the state's share of its commitment of the adequacy gap," state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak said.

Rendell also proposes accountability controls on how a portion of the new money is spent and would limit it to programs he said are proven to increase achievement, including longer school days or school years, smaller classes and preschool or full-day kindergarten.

He also recommends that the 55 school districts who are falling short of state's achievement goals - including Harrisburg, Lebanon, Steelton-Highspire and Central Dauphin -- obtain education department approval for their spending plans for additional state aid they receive.

This accountability provision drew praise from House Republican Leader Sam Smith, R-Jefferson. But Smith said he is disturbed that so much money is directed to initiatives that fall short of what is needed to reverse the trend of 57,000 students graduating every year without proficiency in basic math and reading skills.

"We feel when you can't get the basics, it's not time to get into all these other programs. We need to ensure teachers and districts have the ability to teach how to read, do math and write," said Steve Miskin, Smith's spokesman.

The new formula factors in per-student spending, percentages of low-income students and English language learners, and makes adjustments for district size and regional cost differences. It leaves districts to shoulder the remaining \$1.8 billion needed to fill the adequacy gap.

"There's no expectation" on districts, Zahorchak said, "only the will of the local level to make those decisions."

Part of the districts' burden can be offset by cost-saving moves under consideration, such as a statewide health care contract for school employees and voluntary school district consolidations, he said.

Education advocates were heartened by the governor's commitment to fix what they see as a broken and unfair funding system. Some, including Ron Cowell, president of the Harrisburg-based Education Policy and Leadership Center, called it an "important start" but still lamented the proposed \$291 million boost in funding doesn't go far enough.

"We can't just put a Band-Aid on a gaping wound," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "However, we are encouraged the governor recognizes this problem requires a solid multi-year solution."

Benso praised the \$12.5 million increase in preschool funding, raising it to \$87.5 million. That is expected to enable 1,000 more children to attend preschool programs and allow others to move to full-day programs. About 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded preschool programs.

On the other end of the education spectrum, the governor proposed 3 percent increases for the state universities and community colleges and 1.5 percent increases in funding for the operating budgets at Penn State, Pitt, Temple and Lincoln universities.

Those increases fell short of what the state universities and Penn State. They will have to make their case for more funding in the upcoming budget hearings.

Other initiatives in the budget proposal include:

- \$398 million, or nearly \$12 million more, for state grants for college students. It includes an expected \$35 million contribution from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.
- \$275 million for a block grant fund for programs to raise student achievement.
- \$90 million for classroom technology for high school classrooms and \$20 million to train teachers to use it.
- \$15 million, a \$1.5 million increase, to bring Science: It's Elementary, a hands-on elementary science program to 6,500 more students. But the budget includes no money for Science in Motion, a science program aimed at middle and high school students.
- \$66 million for tutoring in 175 school districts and career and technology centers.

*JAN MURPHY: 717-232-0668 or [jmurphy@patriot-news.com](mailto:jmurphy@patriot-news.com)*