

## Rendell challenges GOP's education funding plan

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Gov. Rendell, ramping up his budget battle with Senate Republicans, said their plans for use of federal stimulus money would force school districts to raise property taxes when the money runs out.

"When the stimulus money goes away, there'll be no way for school districts to keep up without a massive property tax hike," Rendell said to 30 listeners yesterday on the steps of Ridley High School in Folsom.

The governor's appearance came during a five-day media blitz he and state education officials are staging across the commonwealth. They arrived at 2:30 p.m. in a colorfully painted bus and pulled away an hour later.

Rendell wants to use stimulus money to increase basic-education funding by \$418 million. He also wants to use an additional \$317 million in stimulus money for a onetime payment to help districts balance next year's budgets. Head Start funding would be maintained, and prekindergarten funding would rise.

The Senate plan would use \$730 million in federal stimulus money to replace state basic-education funding, leaving overall funding the same as this year's. The Senate bill also calls for about \$273 million in cuts to other Rendell education proposals beyond basic education. The program to put laptops in every high-school classroom would be cut.

Michael Barley, spokesman for the Republican Party of Pennsylvania, said he disagreed with the governor's message and questioned the way it is being delivered.

"I think that the governor himself said that we are facing a pretty steep economic crunch in troubling times. And the first thing he does is launch a taxpayer-funded bus trip to encourage taxpayers to spend more of their tax dollars," Barley said.

Rendell said Senate Bill 850, the work of Senate Republicans, would change the way education is funded, resulting in a \$728 million shortfall in the state's basic education subsidy in two years.

Further, he said, by interrupting a six-year federally funded effort begun last year to teach children basic subjects, any gains already logged would be lost.

"Thirty percent of our children have reached adequacy in English and math," the governor said. "Why would we turn our back on progress?"

Barley said he didn't believe Rendell's threatened property tax hikes would be necessary. He said the Republicans had offered a "fiscally responsible budget."

"It's certainly important for our state to fund education properly," Barley said. "At the same time, there is only so much money to go around. What I hear from the governor is, he is raising taxes to pay for these programs on families that are having trouble making ends meet."

On Wednesday, Rendell said the state might have to raise the personal-income tax to close a budget gap, but he expected to end the tax in three years.

"I have yet to see a tax go away," Barley countered.

Rendell said yesterday that the state budget, already pared to the bone, must absorb another half-billion dollars in cuts.

In a letter sent Thursday, Budget Secretary Mary Soderberg told legislative leaders that the year-end revenue shortfall for 2008-09 was an estimated \$3.2 billion.

She warned of no growth in 2009-10 revenue.

"The national recession has led to a crisis in our revenues and our spending, and we all have to work even harder now to pass a balanced budget," wrote Soderberg.

The deadline for passing the state's fiscal 2010 budget is July 1, but one is unlikely to be enacted by then. Since Rendell became governor, no budget has been passed on time.