

## Pa. support for schools jumps

By Dan Hardy

Inquirer Staff Writer

Philadelphia and its Pennsylvania suburban school districts will share \$82.6 million in new basic education funding next school year under the state budget signed Friday by Gov. Rendell.

The increase in basic education funding represents the largest dollar increase in the program since 1991.

"Even though we are in an economic slowdown, this was our number-one issue this year," said Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Philadelphia), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

Philadelphia will get about \$50.8 million, a 5.8 percent basic subsidy hike. Other districts will receive increases based on need and how highly taxed they are, ranging from \$4.9 million for Upper Darby in Delaware County, a 22.4 percent increase, to \$22,900 for Jenkintown in Montgomery County, or 3 percent.

Of the 64 school districts that make up Philadelphia and its Pennsylvania suburbs, 37 will get the minimum 3 percent increase.

Rendell had initially proposed minimum increases of only 1.5 percent for the wealthiest districts, but unhappy Republicans in the legislature added \$17 million to the budget to boost everyone's funding by at least 3 percent.

Overall, the basic education subsidy will increase by \$275 million statewide, or 5.5 percent. The subsidy formula represents the largest single item in kindergarten-through-12th-grade funding.

Spending on other K-12 programs will bring the total education increase to \$347.4 million, or 3.3 percent. Education is the largest single spending category - \$9.7 billion - in the state's \$28.3 billion budget.

Rendell did not get everything he asked for. His proposed increases for several programs were trimmed by 1.3 percent. Additionally, his Classrooms for the Future program to put laptop computers in every high school core-subject classroom was cut from \$90 million to \$45 million, delaying the complete rollout of the program by a year.

While the Philadelphia School District will receive \$34 million less in basic subsidies than it had been slated to receive in earlier versions of the budget, the shortfall will be made up in other subsidies, said Rendell's senior policy adviser, Donna Cooper.

Just as important as increased basic funding for school districts, Rendell administration and school-reform advocates said, is the way that funding will be distributed.

The \$275 million increase will be handed out according to a funding formula based on a 2007 study of the cost of an adequate education for children in each school district.

The use of the new funding formula, said Janis Risch, of Good Schools Pennsylvania, a reform group that has campaigned for increased funding, "is a tremendous step forward - it . . . begins to really address the education funding inequities experienced by students and communities."

But the legislature, shying away from committing itself to similarly large increases in future years, included only a vague commitment to meet new "state funding targets" by the 2013-14 school year.

The Rendell administration had wanted lawmakers to commit to increasing basic education funding by a total of \$2.6 billion during six years, including the coming school year.

Nevertheless, Rendell aides and Democratic leaders say they see the language that did make it into the legislation as a call to keep increasing state funding until then, using the Rendell formula.

"I think we dramatically advanced the conversation on closing the adequacy gap" among school districts, said Cooper, Rendell's policy adviser. "The legislation has put into law language saying there is a [new funding] target to achieve and they will try to achieve that within six years - that is a giant step forward."

Republicans see the matter differently, saying the legislation is only a commitment to study funding further and come up with some kind of new subsidy scheme.

"It is very clear that the only commitment is to utilize the [Rendell] budget formula for one year - there is no commitment beyond that," said Senate Majority leader Dominic Pileggi (R., Delaware).

The only other thing the new legislation commits the legislature to doing, Pileggi added, is examining the funding formula and the study on which it was based to determine how best to provide money to the districts most in need.

Timothy Allwein, the legislative liaison for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, which supports the Rendell funding formula, said that at the very least, the "target" funding language provides a framework for further discussion.

Rendell suffered at least a partial defeat on one other initiative that he had strongly backed when the legislature delayed implementation of a plan for mandatory state subject tests for at least a year.

The legislature and many school boards had strongly opposed the tests, which some students would have to pass to demonstrate mastery in basic subjects before they could graduate from high school. Some larger school districts, including Philadelphia, have supported the testing requirement.

The state Board of Education had proposed new regulations, saying that the tests would be offered to students starting in 2010, with seniors having to pass them or show their mastery of basic skills in other ways by 2014. The school bill that was passed this year forbids those regulations from being "further promulgated, approved or proposed" before next July.

Cooper, the Rendell senior staffer, said that funding is still in the budget bill for both the development of the tests and the development of a model curriculum to ensure that students are learning what was included in the exams. The state Department of Education will go ahead with developing those tools, she said, and school districts will be able to voluntarily use the tests, even if the state cannot for now mandate them.

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Contact staff writer Dan Hardy at 610-627-2649 or [dhardy@phillynews.com](mailto:dhardy@phillynews.com).