

Editorial: Education Funding

Pluses and minuses for Pa. schools

Gov. Rendell got most of what he wanted in the \$9.7 billion education budget he signed into law Tuesday. It provides the biggest single increase in basic education funding since 1991.

Missing, though, was implementation of a long-term system to fund public education in Pennsylvania. Instead skittish lawmakers left in place the same inadequate formula that underfunds many districts.

A "costing-out" study commissioned by lawmakers last year concluded that Pennsylvania schools are underfunded by \$4.38 billion. Rendell proposed increasing funding by \$2.6 billion over the next six years, but the legislature didn't approve the long-term formula.

It did agree to base the allocations for next school year on need, which is a more practical approach. It means the districts with the largest number of students living in poverty will get the most money. New Jersey adopted a similar model last year.

Education got the largest chunk in the state's \$28.3 billion budget, but the \$274 million increase fell short of the \$291 million raise Rendell had wanted.

Philadelphia and neighboring suburban districts will share \$82.6 million in new basic education funding next school year.

Even wealthy districts will see funding gains since Republican lawmakers ensured that every district will get at least a 3 percent increase, double what Rendell had proposed.

The budget includes funding to enroll about 800 more children in pre-kindergarten, about 200 fewer than Rendell had hoped for. And in a blow to early childhood education, Head Start funding was cut by more than \$500,000.

That wasn't the only disappointment. Lawmakers also blocked a proposal backed by the Rendell administration that would have required high school students to pass a series of subject tests in order to graduate.

Barred from making the tests mandatory, state education officials now plan to provide districts with tests and a model curriculum that can be used on a voluntary basis.

Also bad news is that special education will receive only \$941 million, a 1.7 percent increase. Rendell had sought a 3 percent increase. Local districts will have to shoulder the burden.

Rendell also settled for \$45 million of the \$90 million he had sought as the final installment in a three-year, \$200 million program to put laptops in high school classrooms.

But while the education budget is less than perfect, it moves Pennsylvania closer to guaranteeing that all children can get a decent education, regardless of their home's zip code.