

## Rendell pushes school funding formula at Pocono Mountain West

Photo 1 of 4 | Zoom Photo +



Danielle Holzmann , 18, the senior class president at Pocono Mountain East, left, listens to Gov. Ed Rendell lead a discussion about school funding at Pocono Mountain West on Friday. David Kidwell/Pocono Record

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POCONO PINES — Gov. Ed Rendell says he can accept changes to his proposed educational funding formula, but the most important thing is for the legislature to enact it before adjourning June 30.

Rendell held a panel discussion on his proposal Friday at Pocono Mountain West High School. The 15 panelists included three Poconos school superintendents, three state representatives and Pocono Mountain students, parents and administrators.

The formula would provide a permanent mechanism for distributing basic state aid to Pennsylvania's 501 public school districts. He proposes spending an additional \$2.6 billion on education during the next six years — another \$44 million for five Pocono school districts — with much of the increase targeted to specific programs aimed at boosting student achievement.

"The legislature doesn't have to adopt the formula as is," Rendell said. "We can make changes. We have to get going now. It can't wait."

His proposal also calls for distributing money each year based on updated population figures. For the past 16 years, funding levels have been based on 1991 population counts, penalizing Pocono districts that have experienced the fastest growth rates in the state.

"You'll finally be paid for the actual student population," Rendell told school officials. "It's a very well-thought-out formula."

Rendell called on legislators to begin actively working on the formula June 2, so that differences can be resolved and a formula approved this year. If the House and Senate wait until the end of June to consider a funding formula, he said, last-minute action on a state budget will probably derail education formula action.

Rendell's proposal is based on a recently completed legislative "costing out" study that determined it will cost \$8,300 per student next year to provide an adequate education. His formula calls for gradually increasing funding to help school districts close the gap between what they spend now and what would be needed to reach the \$8,300 level, adjusted for inflation.

The funding increase would have to be spent by local schools on specific programs to improve student performance. The possibilities include additional student learning time such as tutoring, implementing more rigorous courses, teacher training to better help students, class-size reduction, pre-K and full-day kindergarten, recruitment of better teachers and principals, and performance contracts for superintendents and principals.

Rendell said this is the best opportunity in years to enact meaningful education reform.

"This is the best alignment of all the stars," Rendell said. "The idea of stability from a predictable formula should not be lost on folks, including Sen. Rhoads."

Sen. James Rhoads, R-29, is chairman of the Senate Education Committee. The Schuylkill County resident's district includes part of Monroe County's West End.

Rendell explained later that he expects an education funding formula to pass the House but have a tougher time in the Senate. The governor said he doesn't consider Rhoads an obstacle to enacting a formula.

"He could be a key player," said Rendell, who urged residents to contact their individual legislators.

Rendell's plan won generally favorable comments from school officials, while local legislators voiced concerns.

The biggest benefit to a formula, administrators seemed to agree, is the ability to plan and fund specific programs for several years without interruption.

"We hope we will be able to fund those programs consistently over the next six years," said Pleasant Valley Superintendent Doug Arnold.

"We're absolutely thrilled," said Stroudsburg Superintendent John Toleno. "We live in an inconsistent world as far as funding education."

Toleno said his district would like to study the merits of pre-kindergarten, devote additional money to staff development and further reduce class sizes.

Pocono Mountain Superintendent Dwight Pfenning, who moderated the discussion, called upon several of his district's administrators, parents and students to talk about goals and funding needs.

Melissa Myers, an English as a second language teacher at Clear Run Elementary, said more than 900 students — nearly 9 percent of the student population — enrolled in ESL. This includes students whose families speak Spanish, Polish, Arabic, Russian and Creole.

Elizabeth Robison, Pocono Mountain's assistant superintendent for elementary education, said they are faced with the daunting task of assimilating new students each year who need remedial help in math and

reading. She said administrators also want to maintain a low student-teacher ratio.

Rick Smith, a Pocono Mountain school board member, said the current state funding decisions, based on outdated 1991 student populations, have hurt the district.

"I'd like to believe education did not suffer in this district," Smith said. "The taxpayers, however, did suffer."

Smith said a consistent formula will help Pocono Mountain plan better. "If we know the amount ahead of time, it certainly helps us," he said.

Rep. Mario Scavello, R-176, praised Rendell for improving educational funding since becoming governor. But he faulted Rendell's funding formula for leaving out special education and debt service from what would be covered. He said debt service — much of it for new school construction — accounts for 17 percent of Pocono Mountain's budget.

"This formula does not help us," Scavello said. "No governor has helped us more with education than Gov. Rendell."

Rendell held out hope that debt service could be included. "Maybe there is time to put it back in," he said.

Rep. John Siptroth, D-189, agreed that "something should be tweaked" to include debt service in the funding formula.

Rep. Mike Carroll, D-118, said the most important thing is to base state aid on real population numbers.

"For me it's a deal breaker if we're not going to at least count the actual number of students in the school district," Carroll said.

"I agree," Rendell replied.

Two West High students also weighed in on funding priorities. Winston Gordon, a junior and president of the student council, called for an emphasis on after-school tutoring and programs to involve students in community civic projects.

Danielle Holzmann, a senior and president of West High's student government, wants more field trips.

She said she has gone on just one field trip during her high school career despite nearby cultural opportunities in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and close to home. A planned senior class picnic at a local park was canceled because of lack of interest.

"We need to see the best elements of culture so we can build for the future," she said. She called for trips to art museums, preserved coal mine communities or to Philadelphia historic sites.

Rendell emphasized the top priority is getting some formula into place.

"We still may not be able to accomplish all the goals," Rendell said. "But without this we're duck soup."