

Education official touts governor's budget proposal in Brodheadsville

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BRODHEADSVILLE — A Republican-backed funding bill that came from the state Senate only to be quashed in the Democratic House continued to spur dire warnings — of harm to education, or of fiscal apocalypse.

"Senate Bill 850 did a lot of things wrong, and luckily the appropriations committee of the House said no," Gerald Zahorchak, the state's Secretary of Education, said during a press conference Wednesday afternoon at Pleasant Valley's administration building. "But it doesn't stop the ideas from coming to the table during the next couple of days and weeks."

The press conference was part of a weeklong bus tour of more than a dozen school districts. It was meant to drum up support for the budget priorities of Gov. Ed Rendell, particularly for education, and to criticize S.B. 850.

He was trailed by Matthew Brouillette, CEO of the Commonwealth Foundation, a Harrisburg think-tank espousing the health of the free market and limited government. He touted the virtues of the squashed bill as a realistic plan in the midst of a harrowing economy. He also warned of increased taxes on personal income should Rendell's budget become a reality.

"We've been spending a tremendous amount of money over the years," Brouillette said, referring to education. "The pot of money is larger than ever with federal stimulus money."

State funding accounts for the second-largest source of income for the area's four school districts. Local property taxes comprise their largest share, accounting for between two-thirds and more than three-quarters of income.

Comparing the state's two competing education spending plans — from the governor and the Senate — can be complicated. Each plan combines different budgetary categories to make their case. But a line item called basic education funding points out the starkest differences.

Basic education funding is the largest chunk of state funding for K-12 public school districts, and the one over which they exercise the most control. Other funding categories are earmarked for specific purposes, such as special education, or reimburse districts for money they already have spent, on such expenses as transportation.

Rendell's 2009-10 budget proposed \$5.6 billion in basic education funding, an 8 percent increase over the current year.

Senate Bill 850 budgeted nearly \$4.5 billion, or a 14 percent decrease from this year.

Brouillette argued that Senate Bill 850 actually increased education funding by nearly 12 percent over the current year. But this number combines basic education funding, special education money, and \$720 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the stimulus package passed by the federal government.

The stimulus money for public schools largely targets programs for poor students, those requiring special education services, and stabilizes state funding for education.

Pennsylvania's districts and charter schools are receiving \$313 million for stabilization, according to the state's recovery Web site.

"It misuses federal stimulus money and creates a huge canyon," Zahorchak said of the senate bill. "They're stuffing it, or backfilling it, with stimulus money just to get to even."

The stimulus money carries several purposes. It is meant not only to stave off job cuts and budget gaps, but also to fund innovations that will boost student achievement.

But Rendell's budget cuts money from several programs his administration has touted as highly innovative. It halves funding for Classrooms for the Future, a program that marshals technology for project-based learning. It also trims from elementary science programs.

On the other hand, the Senate bill would eliminate both programs entirely, and cut in half the money for pre-kindergarten programs.

Still, for educators such as Wayne Davenport, a Pleasant Valley Middle School social studies teacher, the true measure of the budgetary wrangling on the state level is what flows to the classroom. "When you've operated the way we've operated, there's no place to cut," Davenport said of his district. "Give us the tools we need and don't let the kids down."