



6/19/2008

## State Senate vote on education funding irks Berks County school officials

By David Mekeel  
*Reading Eagle*

A budget bill passed Wednesday by the state Senate would cut Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed \$291 million in basic education funding by nearly 40 percent - and Berks County school officials aren't happy about it.

"I think it's a disaster," said Dr. Robert L. Urzillo, Conrad Weiser superintendent. "It's going to wreak havoc with our budgets. It's a disaster, plain and simple."

The GOP-penned bill is not a final budget. The state House will pass its own budget, then negotiations will be held to reconcile the two. That means some or all of Rendell's proposed education-funding increases could be reinstated.

But the fact that the state's 28 Republican state senators who voted for the measure saw fit to slash the governor's education funding figures by \$118 million isn't sitting well with educators.

"It's not surprising that party politics happens at budget time, but it is surprising that education would be put on the chopping block," state Department of Education spokesman Michael Race said. "Based on the bill they approved, their plan for education is cut and gut."

Local school administrators agreed.

"Of course we're upset because we feel as though the state needs to stand behind education and fund the educational process," said Dr. Teresa Haught, Muhlenberg School District superintendent.

And Daniel Boone Superintendent David H. Robbins said, "At this point in time, I'm sorely disappointed."

Hardest hit could be the Reading School District, which was anticipating a more than \$15 million increase in funding.

Dr. Thomas R. Chapman Jr., the Reading superintendent, said he was unhappy with the proposed cuts and hoped they would not be included in a final budget.

"We're hopeful that the state will recognize their contribution and give us the resources to complete the job we've set out to do," he said.

Overall, the governor's budget contained nearly \$21 million in funding increases for Berks County schools.

The news comes at a particularly difficult time for school districts because they must approve their own budgets by the end of the month and still don't know how much state funding they will get.

"We based our numbers for state aid in our budget on the governor's proposal," Urzillo said. "We have a 0.92-mill increase, but that 0.92 increase is contingent on the basic education funding grant that Gov. Rendell proposed."

"It's becoming ridiculous," Robbins said. "It's now June 18 and they're not going to have a budget by June 30, again. The onus has to be on Harrisburg to change the way work is done."

Sen. Michael A. O'Pake, a Reading Democrat who voted against the budget proposal, said the education cuts are bad news for school districts and taxpayers.

"If this were the final budget, it would translate into even higher local school property taxes on the backs of Berks County's already overburdened property owners," O'Pake said. "It's a serious setback to our school districts, which means it's a setback for our taxpayers."

Sens. James J. Rhoades, Mike Folmer and John C. Rafferty Jr., all of whom represent parts of Berks, voted for the bill. None could be reached for comment.

- Contact reporter David Mekeel at 610-371-5014 or [dmekeel@readingeagle.com](mailto:dmekeel@readingeagle.com).