

Trying to be visible'

Published: Thursday, July 16, 2009

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HARRISBURG — The Norristown Area School District's white T-shirts told the story: "Fund the Formula."

More than 50 local demonstrators, including district administrators, building principals, teachers, parents and students traveled to the state capital Wednesday morning to lobby state legislators weighing Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed \$28.8 billion fiscal 2009 budget.

At stake are major state subsidies for the Norristown Area School District to pay for a large special education student population, English as a Second Language programs and programming initiatives designed to compensate for years of state underfunding. Pennsylvania education officials calculated additional state subsidies this year with a new state "funding formula" for 501 school districts. Federal stimulus funding was added to Norristown's expected budget.

The district's \$125,709,220 budget and "0 percent" increase in the real estate millage rate of 28.417 mills is dependent on the wholesale adoption of Gov. Ed Rendell's education budget with its large state subsidy for the Norristown school district. An alternative budget embodied in state Sen. Bill 850 and endorsed by Republican senators would slice \$1,529,111 from the basic education and special education state allocations in Norristown. Another \$1,520,524 in federal stimulus funding would be cut from the district budget by the Senate bill.

At a 45-minute rally in the Capitol rotunda, Norristown Area Superintendent Janet Samuels, school board member Karen Shanoski, Business Administrator Anne Marie Rohricht, state Rep. Matt Bradford, D-70th Dist.; state Rep. Mike Vereb, R-150th Dist.; state Rep. Tony Payton Jr., D-179th Dist. and Lee Speers, the president of the Education Association of NASD spoke to the group, said Rohricht.

"We are trying to be visible and make a stand," Rohricht said. "Absolutely, this has been a success."

Vereb and Bradford met with the group after the rally in a legislative meeting room.

Members of the district staff met Wednesday morning with state Sen. Daylin Leach, D-17th Dist., and state Sen. John Rafferty, R-44th Dist., on the budget issue, Rohricht said.

About half the group carpooled to Harrisburg in private vehicles and the rest took a Norristown Area School District bus. The expenses for the district bus were paid by an anonymous donor, Rohricht said.

Eisenhower Middle School Principal Christina Taylor said the rally effort was "successful" because both Norristown-area legislators attended the event.

"We made a strong front by having four students, about 10 parents, about 10 to 15 teachers and 10 principals and assistant principals there," Taylor said. "It was important that both legislators were there."

East Norriton Middle School Vice Principal Keya Champagne-Lee was willing to commit to neither Rendell's full-spending education budget nor the state Senate's pared-down version.

"I hope in the next week that they are able to come to a concensus and agreement," Champagne-Lee said. "It was important to make a united front."

Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, estimated this spring that SB 850 would cut the Norristown school district's state allocation by 22 percent (\$292 per pupil); the Pottstown school district by 21 percent (\$596 per pupil) and the Wissahickon school district by 8 percent (\$40 per pupil).

School board member Al Mauthe reported that both Vereb and Bradford emphasized neither side would get everything they wanted in the budget dispute.

"They said they support the funding for our schools," Mauthe said. "We will probably not get as much money as we would like."

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