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## **State school Boss fights cuts**

**State Education secretary speaks out against Senate's education budget, but he is challenged.**

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Education Reporter

EXETER – Warning that “when the state doesn’t do its job, you are faced here locally with determining what gets cut,” state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak urged a crowd outside Wyoming Area High School on Wednesday to oppose the state Senate’s education budget.

Zahorchak arrived on a publicly purchased “Commonwealth One” bus wrapped in pictures of Pennsylvania icons. He also arrived with Matthew Brouillette as an uninvited, self-described “shadow.”

Brouillette, head of the conservative Commonwealth Foundation, supports the Senate budget, which Zahorchak says creates a “\$728 million hole” in state basic education funding.

Brouillette contends the Senate plan increases funding by an average of 11 percent for each school district by using federal stimulus funds to compensate for cuts in state spending.

But Zahorchak and others who spoke for about 30 minutes insisted restrictions on how the stimulus money can be spent make the Senate plan unworkable. Most of the money comes under either federal special education funding or the “Title I” program designed to help low-income students who struggle with reading or math.

“We’ve been told that if you use the stimulus money the wrong way, the way the Senate proposes, they’ll tear up the application” for that money, Zahorchak said.

Brouillette countered that while the stimulus money use is restricted, it still frees up more local money that could be spent as the districts see fit.

Zahorchak argued that using the money the way the Senate plans would take Pennsylvania out of the running for a piece of \$5 billion to be doled out later as part of the stimulus package. Dubbed “Race to the Top,” that money will go to states that use the first round of stimulus money most effectively in improving student achievement.

And Zahorchak and others argued the Senate proposal reneges on a promise the state implemented last year to steadily increase the percentage of basic education funding it pays. That increase started this school year and was continue for six years.

Luzerne County Head Start Executive Director Lynn Biga noted the Senate proposal would cut funding for her agency by half. “That means 124 students would have to stay home” instead of receiving pre-kindergarten and early-education classes, he said.

The battle between Gov. [Ed Rendell](#) and the Republican-controlled Senate has become an annual event, though it is complicated this year by the federal stimulus money and a deep deficit the state is facing as a result of the economic slump.

By law, the budget is supposed to be passed by June 30, but these battles routinely result in a missed deadline.