

# The Bradford Era

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Bradford Mayor Tom Riel joins other school and elected officials statewide in asking Legislature to increase state funding for public schools

**By MIKE SCHREIBER**  
**Era Associate Editor**

A public school funding plan backed by the Rendell administration is meeting resistance from local rural lawmakers, and could hinder budget negotiations over the next few weeks.

On Tuesday, Bradford Mayor Tom Riel traveled to Harrisburg and joined a contingent of school and elected officials from across the state who are looking for the Legislature to further increase state funding for public schools and therefore ease the property tax burden on residents.

The proposal at the center of the debate is the Legislature's Costing-Out Report, which was crafted and passed last year. The plan calls for the creation of a school funding formula that invests \$2.6 billion over the next six years to close the school funding shortfall.

"Failure to act has real economic costs," Riel said. "As a locally elected official, I understand that if the state refuses to live up to its responsibility, then the burden falls to local taxpayers — which in turn hinders our economic growth. The best strategy for long-term property tax relief is for the state to increase funding for our schools."

Riel, who was one of only four mayors in the state asked to speak at the press conference by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, said the city has a median household income far below the state average with its residents paying high school taxes.

"Rather than raise property taxes, it's an elected official's duty to try and increase economic development, bring more professionals to the area and promote new homes being built," Riel said. "These things increase the tax base and offset the need to raise property taxes."

According to Riel, the Costing-Out report found a shortfall of \$1,959 per pupil in the Bradford Area School District, meaning a shortfall of nearly \$49,000 in every class of 25 children. The governor's funding formula would invest \$5.3 million in the district by 2014.

"I believe the General Assembly has a moral and ethical obligation to work with

Gov. Ed Rendell in his efforts to find additional state resources for funding public school systems,” Riel said. “I’m not saying I agree with all the details of the governor’s plan, but I agree with its overall intended purpose.”

Riel said under former Gov. Milton Shapp, 50 percent of public school funding came from the state; that figure is currently around 35 percent.

Bradford Area School District Business Manager Kathy Kelly said over the six-year period, the district would realize a 46.6 percent increase in funding — the most of any district in the area.

That equals out to a roughly 6 percent hike in basic education funding this year, state officials said.

By comparison, Kelly said under the proposal, the Kane Area School District is slated to receive a 30 percent increase in funding over the six years; Otto-Eldred, 43.8 percent; Port Allegany, 36.7 percent; and Smethport, 24.3 percent.

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According to the proposal, any district that receives a basic education funding increase that is more than the Act 1 inflation index — 4.4 percent for 2008-09 — is required to spend the portion of its increase above the index for new programs, among other uses.

“Going year-by-year not knowing what your funding is is difficult (on the budget process),” Kelly said. “I think this (proposal) is wonderful and will help the districts take the burden away from the homeowners and puts it more on the state.”

The district is also waiting to know the fate of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, which provides it with funding from timber receipts from the Allegheny National Forest. The act has not yet been reauthorized in its current format.

Not everybody is happy with the governor’s initiative, however.

Senate President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati, R-Brockway, said the study penalizes some school districts for not having a large tax effort and rewards those that do.

“The governor immediately grabbed it and said this is what we’re going to do,” Scarnati said. “While a lot of school districts like the thought of a multi-year plan, some of our school districts aren’t rewarded.”

Scarnati said Bradford is one of the districts in his senatorial district that fares well in the plan.

“There are others (districts) that are only set to get 1.5 percent,” Scarnati said. “I really have a huge issue with the plan as it’s presented now. It doesn’t favor rural school districts. We need more funding up front for these rural, underprivileged districts.”

According to the proposal, small and rural districts would be in line for larger increases toward the end of the six years, or “back-end funding.”

Scarnati said “without a doubt” it will be a major bone of contention during budget negotiations.

“We can’t bind future Legislatures or governors to this plan,” Scarnati said. “We have to be responsible and fiscally conservative for all of Pennsylvania. We need to take some baby steps here.”

Rep. Kathy Rapp, R-Warren, also said she is not supporting the proposal.

“Education is based on equal opportunity and I don’t see this as having that,” Rapp said, adding Forest County in her legislative district is slated to receive a total of \$36,000 in six years in the plan. “They meet adequately yearly progress every year and have been identified by Standard and Poor’s as a district that has beat the odds each year. But, with that little amount of funding they are looking at going into financial distress and being taken over by the state.”

Rapp also said the funding levels are incongruous; a school district near Philadelphia (Upper Darby) is slated to garner a 22 percent increase.

“Philadelphia schools are looking at getting \$600 million in this plan. It just doesn’t equal out. Those children I represent have just as much right to receive funding for education as anywhere else.”

Rep. Martin Causer, R-Turtlepoint, said he’s concerned about where the funding will come from.

“With the small increase they are set to get, many school districts in my (legislative) district will likely have to have a property tax increase down the road to compensate,” Causer said. “I want to make sure all our schools get a fair amount of funding.”

The lawmaker was also concerned over the length of the proposal.

“While I understand the school superintendents want to have a formula where they

can reasonably anticipate what they'll get each year, they have to understand the political dynamics of the capitol. Things can change here during that time and the politics can change.

“We are not going to just sit back and accept the formula the governor proposes. I really see this as a major, major part of the budget negotiations.”