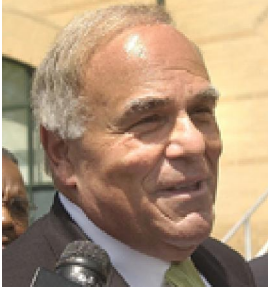


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Governor maps out education funding plan

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Gov. Ed Rendell was at Ridley High School.

RIDLEY TOWNSHIP — Gov. Ed Rendell joined local legislators, parents, students and Ridley School District officials for a roundtable discussion on his proposed education budget Thursday.

Rendell is pushing for a \$2.6 billion increase in education spending over the next six years, beginning with \$291 million in the 2008-09 budget.

The increase is based on the results of a “costing-out” study performed last year to determine the “adequacy gap” of education spending in the state.

The study found Pennsylvania schools need about \$22 billion — nearly \$5 billion more than the nearly \$17 billion currently spent on education — to meet the state’s academic standards.

This budget proposal is the first step in shoring up that gap, said Rendell.

Legislators from both sides of the aisle were on hand to support the Democratic governor’s plan, including state Reps. Nicholas Micozzie, R-163, of Upper Darby, Bryan Lentz, D-161, of Swarthmore, Thaddeus Kirkland, D-159, of Chester, and state Sen. Anthony Williams, D-8, of Philadelphia.

Micozzie, whose district includes Upper Darby, the district with the largest gap between per-pupil spending and the study’s recommended level, has been pushing his Successful Schools Budget legislation for seven years with little luck.

He said as far as this proposal matched that bill, he would support it and encourage his fellow legislators to do likewise.

“This proposal, frankly, is leaps and bounds past (where) most states are,” said Williams. “This puts us not only in front of the game as far as education, but also in economics.”

That was a big part of the discussion Thursday, as increased education funding — especially in areas like science and math — is expected to translate to students who are better suited for college or trades.

Those students would theoretically earn more money, which in turn would be cycled back into the community; essentially the “trickle-down” theory of education.

Rendell said his plan would increase state-funding levels to about 44 percent of what districts spend, adding that more money from the state would obviously mean less funding needed from taxpayers, he added.

“So, for the first time in decades, you will have a declining need for an increase in property taxes,” he said.

The formula used to determine the funding for each of the state’s 501 school districts would begin with a base, per-pupil cost, Rendell said.

The formula would then adjust for things like the number of students living below the poverty level, the number of English as a second language students, size of the district and other factors.

“We looked at all of the factors that are included for districts,” said Rendell. “This formula tries to take into account all of these things.”

For districts that have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under federal No Child Left Behind laws, Rendell said there would be very few restrictions on what they spend the money on, as long as it goes toward education.

Districts that did not make AYP would have to submit a plan with spending priorities mapped out to the Pennsylvania Department of Education for approval.

The money could not be spent on things like infrastructure or capital improvement projects, but department of education spokeswoman Sheila Ballen noted the funds do free up other monies that can be put to those purposes.

While Rendell sees this formula as critical to the future of education in the state, he isn’t married to this version of it.

His administration would be happy to work with the legislature if it sees a need to tweak it here or there, he said, but the state must make a commitment to multi-year education funding in order to allow districts to adequately plan and educate the next generation of Pennsylvanians.

Rendell encouraged the audience to contact their legislators and let them know if they support the plan.

Rendell's plan

1. Start with the formula recommended by the General Assembly’s costing-out study to determine the adequate level of regular education school funding in each school district.
2. Compare each district’s adequacy target to its actual spending to calculate the “adequacy gap.”

The level of state funding would be determined by adjusting each district’s total gap to reflect the level of local wealth and the district’s existing tax burden.

3. Ensure the money goes to good use by requiring any district receiving a basic education funding increase above the Act 1 inflation index (4.4 percent for 2008-09) to spend that surplus on school improvement strategies, such as student supports, smaller classes, pre- or full-day kindergarten, curriculum improvement and teacher training.

