



Armstrong under fire for his vote on school funding

Lancaster New Era

Published: Jun 24, 2008
11:11 EST
Lancaster

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Some parents from Lancaster City schools are outraged that their local state senator would author and vote for a bill that could cost their district \$5.2 million in potential revenue.

The Republican-controlled state Senate passed the budget bill (SB 1389) last Wednesday — in a party-line 28-to-21 vote — that calls for reducing the governor's proposed education budget by \$118 million. It would set the basic education budget at about \$5.12 billion, down from Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed \$5.24 billion.

Lawmakers have until Monday to adopt a final spending plan.

Sandy Rosario, vice chairperson of the Lancaster Parent Advisory Council, said that she and a handful of other parents are calling around, urging parents to join them in letting their state senator know of their disappointment.

"We are asking all parents to call (Gib Armstrong's) office and write him e-mails," Rosario said. "We expect him to be accountable to us. This isn't right."

Armstrong, a Refton Republican, is the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

He said when the governor proposed the education budget, with a 4.2 percent increase, earlier this year, times were better.

"Times are tougher now; our revenues are falling," Armstrong said. "We have to make cuts to what the governor had initially come up with; we don't have the money."

The state would have to raise taxes, he said. And, he said, the trimmer proposal is not cutting spending from last year; it's just scaling back the increase from the governor's proposal.

But, said state Department of Education spokesman Michael Race, someone's going to have to raise taxes, or programs will have to be cut. And, if the Senate's proposed budget goes through, that job will fall to school districts, Race said.

The School District of Lancaster would need to pass a property tax increase of 10 percent to make up for that loss, Race said.

And that 10 percent would come on top of any tax increases already passed to cover the 2008-09 school year, he said.

Armstrong said he has no sympathy for school districts who complain they've already crafted their budgets for the coming school year.

"If we gave them more money, I guarantee, they'd reopen their budget, so that argument doesn't fly with me," he said.

Armstrong continued, "We have funded a 40 percent increase in education in the last six years; that's double and triple the rate of inflation."

Both the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children have opposed the alternative spending plan proposed by the Senate.

But those cuts are not set.

Each year, lawmakers haggle over the budget until negotiators reach an agreement.

The House has its own budget bill.

State Rep. Mike Sturla, a Lancaster City Democrat, could not be reached for comment.

The Senate bill, passed last Wednesday, also calls for cutting funds for a program called Classrooms for the Future to \$45 million, half of what Rendell proposed.

And it provides no new money for the governor's preschool program, Pre-K Counts.

Rendell also proposed teacher professional development funding of \$47.1 million. The Senate calls for cutting that to \$30.4 million.

And the Senate bill would eliminate the governor's funding formula for public education that was born out of the General Assembly's 2007 costing-out study, which found that the state has underfunded public schools.

Rosario said that Armstrong came to the School District of Lancaster three years ago and asked the school board to approve giving a tax break to the private companies funding the downtown Lancaster convention center.

The center is being built by the public Lancaster County Convention Center Authority. The hotel is being developed by private-sector Penn Square Partners.

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She said "he had the nerve" to ask that of us and then now "work against his own constituents."

It shows his priorities, she said.

Lancaster City parent Elizabeth Leonardo says Armstrong "is not in tune with the needs of this community."

The School District of Lancaster has the highest dropout rate in the county. Barely more than half of the students who start ninth grade graduate four years later, Rosario noted.

It also has a 75 percent poverty rate.

The district needs to hire more teachers and counselors, she said.

"We are tapping into every network, every parent in the district," Rosario said. "We want to make sure everyone is aware" of what he's doing.

Armstrong says, "People have elected us to be fiscally responsible. It is irresponsible to spend money we don't have."

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