



Rendell's school aid plan outlined

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Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed permanent school funding formula would provide another \$2.6 billion to Pennsylvania districts during the next six years — another \$44 million locally — while finally taking into account the Poconos' rapid student population growth since 1991.

Those are among points made by a Rendell Cabinet official and members of a school funding reform coalition during separate visits recently to Pocono Record offices in Stroudsburg.

The governor's proposal is based partly on results of the Legislature's costing-out study, which determined that it costs just over \$8,000 per student to provide an adequate education in Pennsylvania to place students at grade-level competency in reading and math.

Rendell wants to gradually boost overall basic educational state aid to 50 percent of what districts need to reach the per-pupil costing-out level, based on past local spending.

At least 80 percent of the new funding above inflation must go to any of seven areas: additional student learning time such as tutoring, implementing more rigorous courses, teacher training to better help students, class-size reduction, pre-K and full-day kindergarten, recruitment of better teachers and principals, and performance contracts for superintendents and principals.

The \$2.6 billion, six-year increase includes a proposed \$291 million hike for the 2008-09 school year.

"It's almost twice the rate we'd typically put in the basic rate subsidy," said Donna Cooper of Rendell's Office of Policy and Planning.

She said the governor's proposal, if approved by the Legislature, would mean about \$44 million in additional school funding for the Poconos over the next six years — the equivalent of what would otherwise be a 14 percent property tax hike.

Local property taxes during the past five years have risen by 31 percent in the Stroudsburg Area School District, 29 percent in Pocono Mountain, 27 percent in East Stroudsburg, 23 percent in Pleasant Valley and 22 percent in Delaware Valley.

Here's how the Rendell administration says the plan, if adopted, would impact local school districts:

- East Stroudsburg Area School District's basic education subsidy would increase by \$7.8 million, or 70 percent during the next six years. It would take a 10 percent local property tax hike to generate the same amount of revenue. The district's student population has increased by 42 percent during the last decade.
- Pleasant Valley School District's state funding would increase by \$13 million, a 69 percent boost over six years. It would take a 34 percent increase in property taxes to generate the same amount of revenue. The district's enrollment has increased by one-third during the past decade, and Pleasant Valley has "the least robust tax base" — and the highest state aid ratio — in the region.
- Pocono Mountain School District's state funding would increase by \$6.35 million during the next six years, or 35 percent, the lowest percentage gain in the region. It would take a 6 percent property tax hike to generate the same revenue.
- Stroudsburg Area School District's state aid subsidy would increase by \$4.6 million, the lowest real dollar increase in the region, or a 54 percent hike for the next six years. It would take a 10 percent local property tax hike to generate the same revenue.
- Delaware Valley School District's basic state aid would increase by nearly \$12 million, a 106 percent hike over six years. It would take a 31 percent local property tax hike to generate the same revenue.

Perhaps the greatest benefit for the Poconos is that the formula uses real-time information on student enrollments, numbers of low-income students, English language learners, and regional cost differences.

The General Assembly has used 1991 enrollment figures during the past 17 years, ignoring rapid student population growth during that time in Monroe and Pike counties.

In recent years, the Legislature approved separate annual appropriations for fast-growing districts. But there are no assurances that growth funding will be added to each year's state budget.

"Not having a formula means we don't think logically," says Joan Benso, president of the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children. "We don't have accountability. A bunch of people go into a room and cut a deal."

The Legislature commissioned its costing-out study to answer that question. A consultant determine it costs a little more than \$8,000 per year to educate a student. The Rendell administration has used the costing-out results, adjusted annually for inflation, as the basis for the new funding formula.

The governor's office took the student costing-out figure, compared it to how much each district currently spends per child, and produced a "total adequacy gap" for each district. The new formula is intended to close that gap. The governor's formula calls for at least a 1.5 percent funding increase for districts already spending at or above the per-student costing-out threshold.

The Pennsylvania Partnership faults the Rendell plan for omitting special education funding from the formula and has other concerns. But Benso says the formula represents the best opportunity in nearly two decades to enact meaningful reform.

Stroudsburg Schools Superintendent John Toleno says the most important thing any funding formula does is provide long term direction on what the state will continue to fund. He said districts are put in a vulnerable position when programs are implemented based on state funding priorities, then those priorities change.

"That's all I would ask," Toleno said. "Let's put it in place and let's wait it out. That's why this being a law is so important."