



## Some Republicans are wary of Rendell education plan

Some Republicans say they're wary of some aspects of Rendell's plan to change education funding.

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Daily Record/Sunday News

Article Launched: 05/22/2008 05:56:16 AM EDT

Gov. Ed Rendell says the system for funding public education in Pennsylvania is inherently flawed, and educators throughout the state have joined a campaign to change it.

If you could distill the reaction of York County's statehouse delegation into two words, they would be: "Well, *duh!*"

For years, local lawmakers have been fighting to make their colleagues in Harrisburg understand the nature of the problem, which they say shortchanges growing areas such as York County when it comes to school funding. Until recently, they've had little success.

Now, Rendell has proposed what Pennsylvania educators and local lawmakers say is most sorely lacking where education funding is concerned -- a consistent, coherent formula for distributing funds to the state's school districts. The catch is, some of the local Republicans aren't certain yet if they support Rendell's proposal, because of reservations about specific elements of it.

If past years are any precedent, however, different factions in the statehouse will hash out education funding as part of the annual budget negotiations in Harrisburg, ideally ending with the passage of a new state budget with the end of another fiscal year on June 30.

State Rep. Ron Miller, R-Jacobus, said he has concerns about some elements of the proposal. Philadelphia, for example, is getting more money than the city is supposed to get under the formula, which he said is pure politics.

Miller hasn't made up his mind if he would vote for it in its present form. Still, he said he must admit that it's nice to see widespread acknowledgement of the problem.

"I applaud the fact that they've finally written a formula," Miller said.

So how did the state end up without a funding formula? In a way, that's like trying to pinpoint one specific disagreement in the middle of a soccer riot.

That metaphorical riot occurred in 1991, when members of the state legislature were trying to pass a balanced state budget in the midst of a recession. They were dealing with a lot of problems at the time, including a budget stalled for 35 days past deadline and drastic tax increases.

Somewhere in all the chaos, lawmakers changed the system of funding public education, doing away with any formula based on the number of students attending a specific district. In effect, whatever a district got that year was whatever state government decided to give it.

So the percentage of education funding might increase or decrease compared to the previous year, but ultimately it was based on what student enrollment was in 1991. And for school districts that have grown since then, such as all of those in York County, that's amounted to a gradual bleeding away of school funding over the years.

Rendell's proposal would take into account both student enrollment and the economic condition of individual districts. Most importantly for supporters of Rendell's plan, it would make those conditions part of a formula to determine school funding in perpetuity.

To get the ball rolling, the plan would provide an additional \$2.6 billion for Pennsylvania schools this year.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association is among the groups supporting the plan. PSEA President James Testerman said the \$2.6 billion would be nice, but not if it comes without a funding formula, too.

"If that happens, our efforts over the last year have been a failure," Testerman said.

State Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, said she has a few objections to the governor's plan. She feels rural school districts aren't getting enough under the formula. And she believes the York Suburban and Dallastown Area school districts would be shortchanged - a consequence of both districts containing pockets of wealth that don't represent the overall population.

Mackereth said it's important to work out those kinks, rather than risk institutionalizing them. But she's also relieved to see the funding problems get some recognition.

"We have been fighting this," she said. "We have been yelling and screaming. We've been doing all the things we needed to do to move us in the right direction. And this is the first step."