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Rendell budget plan includes school funding increase

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WAYNESBORO, Pa. — Pennsylvania schools received a \$354.8 million gift wrapped in question marks on Tuesday.

In his annual budget address, Gov. Ed Rendell proposed an increase for basic education subsidies passed onto the state's 500 school districts.

School business managers in Franklin County reacted with cautious optimism, saying they were concerned that budget negotiations would diminish the final increases, and they didn't know whether new mandates would be tied to the funding.

Chambersburg Area School District Business Manager Steve Dart chose to respond with happiness, if only for one day.

"It's the first good news I've gotten in the budget process," he said.

Chambersburg's projected increase of \$1.6 million could address one of Dart's biggest woes — an estimated \$1.3 million budget shortfall for 2010-11.

"I got ahold of the piece of paper and thought, 'This can't be right,'" Dart said of the governor's requested 8 percent increase for Chambersburg.

Waynesboro Area School District Business Administrator Caroline Dean was pleased with the proposal to increase basic education funding 5 percent in her district. However, she has concerns the \$640,000 increase would include federal stimulus funds that come with their own spending mandates.

"The commonwealth budget seminar will be held on Feb. 18. At that point we will find out all the details," Dean said.

Tuscarora Business Manager Eric Holtzman said he has similar questions.

"The numbers look excellent at this point," he said.

Holtzman said he will make the Tuscarora School Board aware the governor's budget includes an additional \$486,000 for the district. However, he said the board last year budgeted less than the governor's amount because it assumed negotiations would bring the increase down.

"We'll probably be a little conservative with it," Holtzman said.

There was a time when the governor's numbers could be used accurately, but Pennsylvania General Assembly negotiations in the last two years show that practice is now unwise, Dart said. A few versions of Chambersburg's budget reflecting different state proposals will be presented to the school board, he said.

State Rep. Rob Kauffman, R-Franklin/Cumberland, said school district funding problems are a combination of state mandates and their own decisions locally. Some of the mandates must be relaxed, but some school districts would still be dealing with the expensive building projects they started, he said.

"I think we need to look very hard at these issues, fixing the problems instead of throwing money at them," Kauffman said.

State Sen. Richard Alloway, R-Franklin/Adams/York, said he supports a moderate increase for school districts.

"If we don't give them proper funding, they'll have to go back to local taxes," he said.

School districts will be contributing significantly more to the Public School Employees' Retirement System in coming years. Business managers say that is a big consideration for budgeting.

"We're going to address that at the state level," Alloway said.

State Rep. Todd Rock, R-Franklin, said the final budget won't pass with \$1.1 billion in overall new spending as proposed by Rendell.

"It's got to be more responsible than what the governor laid out," he said.

For now, school officials are taking Rendell's spending plan as a good sign.

"It's very encouraging," Dean said.

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