

# The Patriot-News

## Getting an education: Federal money is sticking point on school funding

by Patriot-News Editorial Board

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A good question on next year's PSSA math exam might be to have students make sense of the governor's education funding plan versus the one from the Republicans.

The latest GOP proposal (released Friday) claims that its budget increases education funding by \$715 million, or 11 percent, above last year.

The governor's office is quick to retort that the Republican plan cuts spending by about \$1 billion. At his news conference Monday, the governor and numerous children's advocates asserted the Republican plan would jeopardize the progress of Pennsylvania's children.

Clearly there is a discrepancy between the two sides' numbers. The questions is: What's the real story behind the talking points?

It all boils down to how federal stimulus dollars are used and counted.

The Republican argument is that the federal stimulus dollars for education should be viewed as part of every school district's funds for next year.

They say that even though some of these federal dollars are earmarked for specific purposes -- such as special education or targeting kids in poverty -- school districts will still have more money overall, and they can re-direct money they would have spent on special ed, for example, to basic education.

In the Republican mind-set, the federal stimulus dollars become a substitute for some of the increased funding the state would give to school districts this year.

Gov. Rendell's administration views the GOP plan as a step back. It believes the state must honor its commitment to education by continuing to increase state funding. His budget adds more than \$400 million to basic education compared with last year.

This is exactly what the 2007 "School Costing Out" study, which was commissioned by a Republican-controlled Legislature, said was prudent to do to get Pennsylvania's education funding back on track and competitive with other parts of the country.

There also is an added incentive this year to increase the state's education funding: competitive stimulus grants. The federal Department of Education is set to award \$15 billion in "Race to the Top" funds. One criteria is for states to show that they have used their federal stimulus money to expand current programs, not just to keep them afloat.

In a letter to Gov. Rendell recently, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan warned that Pennsylvania's "competitive position to receive Race to the Top Funds and/or other competitive grants may be "negatively impacted" if the GOP plan were enacted.

Republicans counter that Rendell's plan will lead to an even harsher day of reckoning in 2012 when stimulus funds run out, but school districts will be reliant on that extra billion. Who will make up all that funding then, especially given the looming pension crisis?

Behind the Republican and Democratic news conferences, there are real differences that the public must understand.

Gov. Rendell wants \$1.1 billion more (in addition to stimulus funds) in state funding for education than the Republicans are proposing. That's a sizable figure in a year when the deficit is more than \$3 billion.

On the Republican side, its proposal would trim \$724 million from state basic education funding compared with last year. Some of that money would be made up from federal stimulus dollars, but it's not a direct substitute.

As we continue to advocate, the right course of action is likely a compromise somewhere in between, but that would require both sides to stop claiming the sky is falling if the other party's plan is passed.