

Gov. Rendell's message in city visit: Pa. can't afford to cut school funding

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Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell responds to a question from the media Tuesday during a press conference at Fulton Elementary School.

Gov. Ed Rendell issued a simple warning Tuesday to Republican lawmakers who want to slash millions in public school funding from next year's state budget: "Don't mess with education."

Education is too important to the state's future to fall victim to cost-cutting in the 2009-10 state budget, even in a recession year, Rendell said at a noon news conference outside Fulton Elementary School on West Orange Street.

Rendell was in Lancaster city to lobby for passage of his proposed \$29 billion budget, which would boost Pennsylvania's personal income tax rate by 0.5 percent to help close a projected \$3.2 billion revenue shortfall.

The visit prompted state Rep. Katie True, a Republican from East Hempfield Township, to criticize Rendell, a Democrat, for leaving Harrisburg just a week before the June 30 deadline for getting a budget approved.

"I think it would be better for the commonwealth if he was working in Harrisburg to try to find a way to deal with the budget problem," True said. "He should be here with all the leaders and the rest of us hammering out the budget."

Rendell admitted Tuesday that there is no consensus among legislators from both parties on the spending plan.

But he said the \$27.3 billion budget proposal approved by the Republican-controlled Senate in May was a step in the wrong direction.

The bill, which calls for no tax increases, would leave a \$728 million hole in basic education funding, forcing school districts to raise taxes, Rendell said.

"It's not a no-tax budget," Rendell said. "It's a pass-the-buck budget to the school districts, who will be forced to raise property taxes far more significantly than if we do the right thing in Harrisburg."

The Senate budget would reduce funding to School District of Lancaster by \$6 million from what Rendell is proposing, SDL school board member Michael Rowen said.

The cuts would nearly wipe out the progress the district made this year in getting a bigger share of state funds under a new formula based on the state's "costing-out" study, which found Pennsylvania public schools were underfunded by about \$4.4 billion a year.

The Rendell administration proposed a six-year plan to ratchet up funding to eliminate the inequities, but the Legislature committed to the funding formula for only one year, the governor said.

"It's not mandatory for them to comply with their own accountability study, but it should be embarrassing," Rendell said.

The Republican budget "throws us back to the levels of funding that existed in the 2005-06 budget," he said. "Why would we want to go back, with all the progress we've made in education?"

The funding cuts would force SDL to boost its proposed 2009-10 property tax increase from 3.52 percent to 5.8 percent, the maximum allowed under state law, Rendell said.

The district also would have to dip into its meager fund balance and consider cuts to teaching positions, school resource officers, middle school sports programs and other extracurricular activities, SDL officials have said.

Rendell admitted he would rather not have to raise the state income tax rate, but doing so now to provide adequate funding for education will pay off in the future, he said.

"It's too important to our children, whom we owe a moral obligation to educate well enough that they can reach their full potential," he said.

"And it's also too important to the state because ... 15 years from now, when (today's) fourth-graders are in the work force or higher education, the currency that will determine which states have the most viable income is not resources — oil or water.

"It's not location. It's going to be the existence of a knowledgeable, skilled, highly trained and highly educated work force.

"And if we cut education (funding) now, we are cutting off our economic future at the knees."

True said she would like to continue to fund education based on the costing-out report, but "the revenue is not there."

She also doesn't support a tax increase during a recession.

"I don't think it's the right time for taking money out of other people's pockets," she said. "Economically, it's a terrible time to do that."

State Sen. Lloyd Smucker, a West Lampeter Township Republican, said in an e-mail that "good things will continue to take place in our schools, even in the absence of the big spending increase that Gov. Rendell is recommending."

"The effort to control state spending and balance the state budget without a tax increase is not anti-education," he said.

"Rather, it is respectful of the wishes of the majority of Pennsylvania taxpayers."

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