

Officials discuss education funding

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State representatives Mike Gerber, D-148th Dist., Josh Shapiro, D-153rd Dist., and Rick Taylor, D-151st Dist., met with the Upper Dublin School Board Oct. 12 in a public meeting to discuss the newly passed state budget and its impact on education funding.

Gerber, Shapiro and Taylor are three of the four state representatives whose districts include portions of Upper Dublin Township. The fourth is Tom Murt, R-152.

The three began by discussing the state budget negotiations, which led to the longest budget impasse in the nation this year.

“There’s no excuse for that 101-day delay,” Shapiro said. “However, we said it was worth fighting on. At the end of the day, I think we ended up with a budget that was fair.”

“This has probably been the most difficult task as a legislator,” Taylor said. “We were still able to prioritize correctly and say we need to give more to our children.”

All three spoke on how they opposed Senate Bill 850, the budget proposed by the Republican-majority state Senate May 1.

“The investments we wanted to make in education weren’t there in Senate Bill 850,” Shapiro said.

The three discussed their role in bringing about the final budget.

“I’m proud to say we really led the charge out of the Southeast,” said Gerber, who is chairman of the southeast regional caucus.

“We were all standing up for education,” Shapiro said.

While the three did not get a budget that included all of the funding for education they wanted, Gerber said they feel the final budget is a much better alternative than S.B. 850.

The final budget includes \$711 million more for education than S.B. 850 proposed, according to Gerber.

The three also noted the budget includes a \$300 million increase in state education funding, a sharp contrast to the national norm.

“We were the only state in the country to increase funding for public education,” Shapiro said.

The representatives discussed what the budget will mean to the district.

“You’re going to get a 2 percent bump, which is better than nothing or a cut,” Gerber said.

“While I know it’s tough on your district to only get a 2 percent bump, the impact we’re going to make to the poorer school districts is tremendous.”

However, the legislators did mention there may be flaws in how state education funding is currently distributed.

Shapiro said most Montgomery County school districts receive approximately 12 cents on the dollar from taxes and said the Legislature needs to investigate the formula.

“There had to be a more equitable way to distribute that money,” Shapiro said.

The representatives also opened the discussion up to other topics concerning education, one of which was the pending state pension crisis.

In 2001, Gov. Tom Ridge and the Legislature voted for a plan that will increase pensions for state workers and teachers by 25 percent in 2012, according to AP reports.

However, with the downturn the economy has taken, school districts are scrambling to cover the costs of these increases.

“It may be too much for local communities to bear,” Superintendent Michael Pladus said.

Gerber said the Legislature is looking into some “actuarial tweaking” of the situation but acknowledged the state was facing a \$5 billion problem he called “terribly irresponsible” of the previous administration and Legislature.

Act 1 was also a topic of discussion, with the board expressing its concerns with the legislation.

Act 1 prevents school districts from raising property taxes beyond a state-regulated annual increase unless residents approve an increase referendum.

“Act 1 froze us on our base,” school board Vice President Joseph Chmielewski said. “We’re worried if in the coming years we’re going to be able to sustain this excellence.”

“With Act 1, there’s only so much you can do,” Gerber said. “Very few people are ever going to fight to raise their taxes, and that’s what Act 1 forces you to do. Ultimately, schools are going to suffer.”

Board members also presented concerns about the proposed Keystone Exams, which would be used as standardized tests to judge student achievement beginning with the Class of 2015.

“The exams have been presented as a great equalizer ... but isn’t it a great minimizer?” board member David Robinson asked, noting teaching to the tests may cause Upper Dublin students to miss out on higher-level subject material.

The representatives spoke against the Keystone exams.

“There should be local control within the school districts to make these decisions,” Taylor said.

“It’s exactly the wrong direction, in my estimation, we should be going in,” Shapiro said.

While the representatives said they fought hard to achieve a budget they believed was fair, they said the Legislature will encounter a similar fight over education funding in coming years.

“We’re going to be looking at the same type of conundrum,” Gerber said, noting \$2.6 billion for education funding in the current budget came from stimulus money, which will disappear in two years.

Because of the future threat to education funding, the representatives encouraged the school board members to express their views as the Legislature drafts upcoming budgets.

“We need you to be engaged,” Shapiro said. “We’re going to need your help in articulating those problems.”