

## **Rendell preserves school aid in budget**

**A top lawmaker cited the governor's "unnegotiable commitment to education" in producing the accord.**

By Dan Hardy

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From his first day in office in 2003, Gov. Rendell has staked out an ambitious agenda for increasing the state's role in how, and how well, Pennsylvania's public schools educate children.

He won sizeable increases in state funding, especially for poorer districts. Early-education programs were created and later expanded. High school programs were targeted for improvement.

Those goals were threatened this year by the recession and pressure to cut spending.

But Rendell again seems to have gotten much of what he wanted in public school funding in the budget agreement announced late Friday.

Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R, Delaware) said Friday night that Rendell's "unnegotiable commitment to education" had produced an accord that "preserves his goals and objectives in education."

While few details were available yesterday, school districts would receive much of the money they had expected to get from the state. They would not have to raise local taxes to make up for any shortfall in state aid, House Speaker Keith McCall (D., Carbon) said Friday night.

Under the spending plan, basic education funding, the state's main subsidy for districts, would increase by \$300 million over last year. The amount is still \$118 million less than what Rendell proposed in the spring.

No major Rendell public school programs would be cut substantially below the spending levels he accepted earlier this year. But \$314 million in federal stimulus money, which Rendell had wanted to go directly to school districts, would instead help pay for basic education funding and other programs.

This funding would go to districts following a formula that sends more money to struggling districts and takes into account poverty, the number of English language learners, and district size.

Also, early-childhood programs would get more money. One program that lawmakers had slated for elimination - Science: It's Elementary - would be restored.

The Philadelphia School District gets about 55 percent of its \$3.2 billion budget from the state. Michael Masch, the district's chief business officer, said yesterday that it would get about \$150 million less than it had hoped for.

Still, Masch said, the district "is extremely grateful to the governor and the legislature for recognizing that we cannot recover from the recession without successful schools."

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Jake Corman (R., Centre) said yesterday that the budget agreement sticks to the overall spending framework House and Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans first announced Sept. 11.

"We allowed the governor to restore lines [in the education budget] to the levels he wanted as long as . . . he was able to find other places to cut in the budget," Corman said.

Timothy Allwein, legislative liaison for the state school boards association, said yesterday that overall, "in a year when there was so much pain, it's gratifying to see that our legislative leaders see an investment in education as just that - an investment in the future of the state."

As for Rendell, Allwein said, "I think he's proven time and again that education is important to him. I'm gratified that through his strong commitment, he has convinced the legislature of the need to continue to support it."

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