

Cutting education funding will hurt local taxpayers

Published: Monday, June 22, 2009

Local educators are not the only ones concerned about the state Senate's plan to cut education funding. Last week, the Obama administration warned Pennsylvania lawmakers that the federal government may withhold millions of dollars if they use stimulus money to plug budget holes instead of boosting aid for schools.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan made the threat in a letter to Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, expressing displeasure with a plan by Pennsylvania's Republican-led Senate to reduce the share of the state budget for education while leaving its rainy-day surplus untouched.

Duncan said the plan may hurt Pennsylvania's chance to compete for a \$5 billion competitive grant fund created by the stimulus law to reward states and school districts that adopt innovations Obama supports.

Obama did not intend for state lawmakers to simply cut state education spending and replace it with stimulus dollars, and Rendell asked Duncan to weigh in on the issue.

The federal stimulus dollars earmarked for education have become a bone of contention in the continuing debate about how and where to balance the state budget as the June 30 deadline approaches.

But the stimulus money is not the only thing being debated to ensure adequate funding of public schools. Another issue is the state Senate's attempt to abandon the school funding formula enacted last July. The Senate's proposed education budget undermines the formula by proposing to roll back state funding for all school districts to 2006 levels.

Such a move would have a drastic effect on financially distressed school districts like Pottstown where homeowners are already struggling.

In an analysis released by Good Schools Pennsylvania, the Pottstown School District, with 53 percent of its students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program, would see a \$595 cut per student in state funding, which constitutes a 21 percent cut in its state education subsidy.

In contrast, Wissahickon School District, with no more than 7 percent of its students in poverty, would experience only a \$40 cut per student in state funding, or the equivalent of an 8 percent cut in its basic education subsidy.

Daniel Boone would get a 31 percent cut or \$622 per pupil, while Owen J. Roberts would experience an

8 percent cut or \$87 per pupil.

"This disproportionate cut in state funding will put many of the poorest school districts in a precarious position," said Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania.

"They will face great difficulties in the short term in trying to use restricted Title I and IDEA funds to replace the state's basic education subsidy. Furthermore, they will be furthest behind the starting line when federal funding expires and must be replaced with state funding."

Furthermore, the notion that balancing the state budget on the backs of local schools will help taxpayers is ludicrous. The tri-county area, particularly in areas like Pottstown and Daniel Boone, suffers unduly from the burden of property taxes, not the state income or sales taxes.

The state can and must find means of reducing expenses in the proposed state budget, but taking the stimulus money away from local schools and cutting the education subsidy are not the answers.

In the end, the taxpayers of Pennsylvania will pay dearly for a shift in tax burden that does nothing but preserve the sanctity of the Legislature.