

Rendell, GOP clash over kindergarten cash

By Dan Hardy
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Working with a sometimes-recalcitrant Republican-controlled legislature for the last four years, Gov. Rendell has nonetheless asked for and received sizable increases in state public education funding.

The price for getting the money, however, has often been to satisfy the GOP preference for local control by funding many programs through a block-grant system that allows school districts to decide where the dollars they get should be spent.

This year, Rendell wants to depart from that arrangement. He is seeking \$100 million in new funding to be earmarked for the expansion of prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs targeted to needy districts. GOP legislative leaders want to funnel funding increases for those programs into the block-grant program.

The outcome could determine whether Pennsylvania moves rapidly to embrace expanded early-childhood education, which is being promoted in many states as a way to improve academic performance. In the 2005-06 school year, the latest for which statistics were available, Pennsylvania ranked 30th in the country for percentage of children in state-run prekindergarten programs.

The centerpiece of Rendell's education budget is a \$75 million prekindergarten proposal to provide services to about 11,000 3- and 4-year olds in public schools, Head Start programs, private child-care centers, and nursery schools.

The governor also wants \$25 million to boost full-day kindergarten enrollment and \$90 million for a program that buys laptop computers for classrooms.

The Republican legislative leadership has proposed spending \$25 million more on the block-grant program and giving \$20 million for computer purchases, but it has rejected separate funding for prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten.

Education is the biggest item in the state's \$27.3 billion budget. Tomorrow is the deadline for its passage, but disagreements over spending could delay approval into July.

The Rendell prekindergarten initiative would almost double the number of children in state-funded programs from about 12,000 last school year. Six of 64 area school districts, including Philadelphia's, have some children already in prekindergarten programs.

This school year, 55 percent of Pennsylvania's children were in full-day kindergarten programs; the new money would increase that to 65 percent. About half of the 64 area districts have full-day programs for at least some children; about 30 percent offer it to all students.

The governor's Classrooms for the Future initiative would spend the \$90 million to purchase 83,000 laptop computers for 10,000 classrooms in 357 schools. An additional \$11 million would go for teacher technology training. The goal is a laptop for every Pennsylvania high school student in a core-academic-subject classroom.

Last school year, the program spent \$20 million for laptops in 103 high schools in 79 of Pennsylvania's 501 districts.

If Rendell gets his wishes, the new state education budget will total \$9.3 billion, an increase of about \$528 million - 6 percent. The state basic education subsidy would increase by 3.5 percent; special-education funding would grow by 3 percent. Education spending makes up more than a third of the governor's proposed state budget.

The prekindergarten initiative has drawn unusually broad support: District attorneys and police chiefs are working with United Way agencies, early-childhood education advocates, and private child-care providers to get the legislation passed.

"The single most important thing that can be enacted in this budget is the pre-K funding," said Joan Benso, the head of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a child-advocacy group. "We know from 40 years of research that children who are at risk of educational failure who attend high-quality programs . . . enter school better prepared and do better when they get there."

The prekindergarten plan has drawn fire from groups that don't want to see further state regulation of preschool. "Our view is that we should continue to leave preschool education to the private sector, which has been doing a good job of it," said Nathan Benefield, research director for the Commonwealth Foundation, a conservative think tank.

The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference also opposes the plan, saying that religious child-care providers not willing to accept state guidelines for how to run their programs would be excluded.

Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said this week that prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs are vital because they provide "a blueprint for the state's future. You must lay the foundation for kids to compete."

The program for computers in schools is important, Evans said, because "this is the future - laptops are part of the plan for modernizing this state for the 21st century."

Most Republican legislators don't see it that way, said Steve Miskin, spokesman for House Minority Leader Sam Smith (R, Jefferson).

Miskin said that the Democratic prekindergarten, full-day kindergarten and laptop-computer proposals are "unfunded or underfunded mandates," with extra costs to set them up or keep them going. The computer initiative has not proved to be educationally effective in other states, he said.

"Local districts should get to make the choices that they need, period," he added.

Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi vowed to hold overall state spending within the rate of inflation. "In that environment, it's hard to spend a lot of money on new programs," he said. But "we are always willing to talk to the other side and to the governor, as long as our overall goals are met."

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