



Budget provides funds for pre-kindergarten, laptops

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

One of the big winners in the state budget appears to be pre-kindergarten.

While details of the education budget were sketchy, multiple reports indicated that Gov. Ed Rendell got \$75 million to provide pre-kindergarten to about 11,000 additional children beginning this fall.

As of late yesterday afternoon, the details had not been committed to writing.

The governor's news release said that he was "able to keep funding" for pre-kindergarten and laptop computers as well as some other initiatives.

The laptop computers are part of a \$90 million plan that includes adding 250 more high schools to the Classrooms for the Future initiative, which includes laptops and other technology. During 2006-07, 103 high schools participated in the first year of the program at a cost of \$20 million.

As of yesterday afternoon, the state Department of Education did not have information on the funding levels of various proposals.

The budget deal also has implications for public campuses that are about to set their tuitions.

University officials yesterday were still waiting for details about what the agreement will mean for their schools. The University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University are expected to set their tuitions later this week, but the State System of Higher Education has postponed its plan to do so until July 19.

Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a nonprofit organization that lobbied heavily for pre-kindergarten money, said she heard from both sides of the aisle that the money is OK.

"This is a phenomenal victory for children and their families in Pennsylvania," she said. "We now put ourselves in the position of assuring that more children are going to enter school [kindergarten] in a year, ready to learn. They'll have that rich preschool opportunity that will help their school readiness and

ultimately improve their education outcomes."

Tim Allwein, assistant executive director for governmental and member relations for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, said he, too, heard that \$75 million was allotted for pre-kindergarten.

He said he was glad that the extra money does not appear to come out of the accountability block grants, which in the old budget were set at \$250 million for school districts to spend. It was unclear how much of an increase in those grants might be in the offing.

"Regardless of what you think of pre-K, the fact of the matter is if you look at all of the things in the education budget, I don't think there is anything as proven as far as results more so than pre-K," Mr. Allwein said.

The pre-kindergarten programs must meet certain quality standards.

The money must be used to serve children at risk of educational failure, like those in a home where English is not spoken, have a disability or have a family income of 300 percent of poverty or less. That amounts to an income of about \$60,000 a year or less for a family of four.

Under the old budget, Ms. Benso said, 16 percent -- about 49,000 children -- of 3- and 4-year-olds statewide were in publicly financed, high-quality preschool programs, like Head Start and preschool programs offered by public schools.

She said the state spent about \$40 million a year to supplement federal Head Start money. In addition, school districts used about \$16 million of their accountability block grants on preschool education, she said.

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