



The Patriot-News

Education agenda survives

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BY JAN MURPHY
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Gov. Ed Rendell claimed many victories in Monday's \$27.4 billion state budget deal, but the first he mentioned at his news conference was his declaration that "all of the funding is intact" for two key educational initiatives.

As was his plan when he announced his budget priorities in February, Rendell said he will invest \$75 million in expanding access to preschool to 11,000 more children and \$25 million into increasing the availability of full-day kindergarten to about two-thirds of the state's school districts.

He also announced that his Classrooms for the Future initiative will be fully funded. It will put \$90 million into buying technology for high school classrooms and \$11 million into training teachers how to use this tool to deliver instruction.

The funding for preschool represents a more than doubling of last year's \$56 million investment and a quadrupling of the state's funding for the technology program.

"If we got everything we asked for in February ... that's a huge coup," said Mike Race, a spokesman for the state Department of Education.

Some of the preschool money is expected to help salvage Harrisburg School District's preschool program that was in danger of being cut in half because of lack of funding.

Rep. Ron Buxton, D-Harrisburg, said district Superintendent Gerald Kohn advised him that he had received such assurance from Rendell's senior staff. Neither Kohn nor Rendell's staff returned e-mails or phone calls yesterday seeking confirmation.

The district's request for \$20 million extra for alternative education and Sci-Tech High remains in limbo, Buxton said.

A preschool proponent was stunned by the deal.

Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, has battled opponents who saw this as a costly expansion of the public school system. Even school boards didn't embrace the idea of limiting the \$100 million investment strictly in preschool.

"There were many times along the way that I could not fathom that we would win the governor's whole proposal" on preschool and full-day kindergarten, Benso said.

Benso said the aid for preschools will reduce special education and remediation costs and raise graduation rates.

She said it moves Pennsylvania from near the bottom of the states in funding preschool to the middle of the pack. As for the quality of the state-funded preschool programs, she said the standards being put into place will place the state among the nation's best.

The preschool initiative will give priority to public or private preschools in communities where at least 30 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch or where a high concentration of children at risk of education failure live.

Eric Karolak, executive director of the Early Care and Education Consortium, which represents 250 private preschool providers in Pennsylvania, called it smart to open it up to private providers who meet standards rather than limiting it to school districts that might have to build buildings to offer preschool.

House and Senate Republican legislators accepted the funding as part of the compromise, but continue to have concerns about the early education programs' cost and the lack of flexibility in how districts could use the money. They also were skeptical of the technology initiative that seeks to put a laptop on every high school desk in core subjects and insisted on reporting requirements.

"Many of our members still question the wisdom of this spending, based on the mixed experience in other states," said Senate Republican spokesman Erik Arneson.

Michael Geer, president of the Pennsylvania Family Institute, said the preschool initiative eliminates competition in the preschool arena, isn't targeted to the neediest kids and forces faith-based preschools to eliminate religious teachings to qualify for aid.

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WHO GETS FUNDING

The 2007-08 education budget is expected to include:

- \$75 million to expand preschool programs.
- \$25 million for full-day kindergarten programs.
- \$90 million for high school classroom laptop computers.
- \$11 million for technology training for teachers.
- \$75 million for tax credits to businesses that donate to groups that provide preschool and K-12 scholarships and innovative programming in public schools.
- \$200 million for accountability block grants for districts.

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