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Rendell's education proposals are part of deal

By Dan Hardy

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Gov. Rendell scored a victory for his education agenda in the state budget negotiations.

Funding for his top-priority Department of Education programs - prekindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and Classrooms for the Future, which purchases laptop computers for high schools - is part of the new budget agreement, said Barbara Fellencer, a spokeswoman for House Appropriations Committee Chairman Dwight Evans (D., Phila.).

Rendell said Monday night that all \$75 million he had asked for in prekindergarten funding is in the new budget. Fellencer said yesterday afternoon that the amount for each of the other two programs has not yet been determined. Rendell had requested \$25 million for full-day kindergarten programs and \$90 million for Classrooms for the Future.

The prekindergarten and kindergarten funding in particular represents a significant achievement for Rendell, who has sought more state money for early education since becoming governor.

Before this, state funding for public-school-only prekindergarten and kindergarten came through a block-grant system that allowed school districts to decide what areas the grant money should go to, so there was no guarantee they would pick those two items from the menu of choices. The Republican legislative leadership had sought to fund prekindergarten and kindergarten through block grants again this year.

The \$75 million in prekindergarten funding will provide services to about 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds in both public and private programs, including public schools, Head Start programs, private child-care centers, and nursery schools. That will almost double the number of children in state-funded programs, from about 12,000 last school year. Six of 64 Philadelphia-area school districts, including the city's, have some children already in prekindergarten programs.

This school year, 55 percent of Pennsylvania's children were in full-day kindergarten programs; if Rendell got all of the \$25 million he wanted, that would increase 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 prekindergarten funding "is a wonderful step forward for the children of Pennsylvania," said Joan Benso, the head of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which worked for the passage of the measure. "It will create a significant investment in high-quality prekindergarten that will enable the children to achieve the educational attainments we expect for all of our students." The \$75 million, she added, "will return the investment many times over."

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