

## Funding formula does no favors for Philly

Aug 06, 2009

By JEFF HAWKES, Staff Writer

Are you angry with Gov. Ed Rendell for wanting to raise your taxes?

Apparently, Sen. Dominic Pileggi doesn't think you're angry enough.

Pileggi, of Delaware County, is the leader of the majority Republicans in the state Senate and Rendell's chief nemesis in Pennsylvania's five-week-old budget war.

And on cable TV the other day, Pileggi said something that's sure to get lots of taxpayers steamed.

He said that schools in Rendell's home city of Philadelphia are getting more than their fair share of state funding.

The governor has been able to tilt things in Philadelphia's favor, Pileggi said, despite a formula enacted last year to bring fairness to school funding.

"We looked through the formula and found out that there was extra money added on top of the formula for Philadelphia," Pileggi said in the PCN interview.

He described it as "a little hand on the scale of the formula."

"It's a complicated formula," Pileggi added, but the result is "Philadelphia gets a disproportionate share."

Pileggi's claim sounded fishy. Yeah, the formula is full of arcane calculations that might challenge a rocket scientist.

But the formula is no secret. It's there on the state Education Department's Web site for all to see. There's also a spreadsheet that shows what numbers are plugged into the formula for each school district.

Lifting the curtain on school funding was a big reason the Legislature approved it in the first place. It takes politics out of the equation.

No longer are lawmakers able to say, "I'll vote for that stadium in your district if you agree my school district gets a funding bump."

A district gets a funding bump only if the formula says it gets one. And that would happen only if something in the district changed, such as an influx of students from a new housing development.

"We don't agree Philadelphia is being favored," Michael Masch, chief business officer for Philadelphia schools, told me.

Likewise, state Sen. Michael Stack, a Democrat from Philadelphia, was dubious about Pileggi's funding claim.

"I love Sen. Pileggi, but I do not know what he's talking about," Stack said. He said that giving people the idea that Philadelphia gets more than it deserves "hits a nerve."

"If there's a way that there's a heavier hand on the scale," he said, "I'm interested in knowing how they can do it."

I was interested, too, and called Erik Arneson, Pileggi's spokesman, who repeated the claim that the governor has his "thumb on the scale" of the formula. How so?

He said it has to do with the way the governor is choosing to spend \$313 million in federal stimulus dollars.

"The governor chose the approach that would drive the most to Philadelphia," Arneson said. As a result, Philadelphia gets about \$11.5 million more than from another funding approach, "which is certainly fair to describe as 'a thumb on the scale.' "

Not everyone agrees.

"It's not a thumb on the scale" favoring Philadelphia, said Michael Race, Education Department spokesman.

"I don't see a thumb," said Baruch Kintisch, of Education Law Center, a nonprofit Pennsylvania advocacy group.

They see no thumb because, first, the governor has no choice in how that \$313 million is distributed. Federal law requires him to follow a federal formula to allocate that federal money.

Second, they see no thumb because the \$313 million will be divided among some 450 school districts, Philadelphia being but one of those districts.

And the federal formula, not the governor, calculates what each district receives.

"There's nothing clandestine about it," Race said. "You'll probably find other districts that are benefiting as much, if not more, than Philadelphia."

It seems Pileggi's claim that the governor is favoring Philadelphia over the rest of the state amounts to nothing more than age-old Philadelphia bashing.

Race said that the senator "knows in his district, as well as in other parts of the state, it earns you political points to badmouth Philadelphia."

And even in this new age of objective formulas, Pileggi is still playing games with school funding. That's a shame.

"The beauty of a funding formula," Kintisch said, "is that it doesn't play politics. It just looks at the facts to meet the real needs of students and schools. The governor is not playing politics with education funding. He's following the law, and that's what's best for kids and schools."

So you can still be angry about the governor wanting to raise taxes. Just don't blame Philadelphia.

*E-mail: [jhawkes@lnpnews.com](mailto:jhawkes@lnpnews.com)*