

Education stimulus spending outlined

By Dan Hardy
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Under Gov. Rendell's proposal for spending federal education stimulus money, Philadelphia schools would stand to get \$361 million in additional funding next school year, and suburban districts would get a total of \$88 million in new funding.

That money is part of \$1.1 billion in stimulus money that Pennsylvania would spend on assorted education programs starting in July, according to a plan released yesterday by the state Department of Education.

About a third of that money would go directly to a handful of programs targeted to low-income students and special education.

Rendell wants to designate the rest of the money - totaling \$728 million - to two broad programs. One would supplement the state's regular education funding, which otherwise could face cuts reflecting the poor state of economy. The other would represent new money that districts could use on a variety of programs, including classroom instruction, school renovations, and technology upgrades. It could also be used to make up for any lost school-tax revenue.

The \$728 million is required to be spent as part of Pennsylvania's new budget, which lawmakers must adopt by July 1. Already Rendell's proposals for spending it - including the amount he wants to send to Philadelphia - has been met with resistance from some lawmakers. The Senate majority leader said the money targeted for Philadelphia was excessive.

Many school officials, including those from Philadelphia, said yesterday they were still analyzing the proposal and could not say much about how they would spend any of the money.

Many districts around Philadelphia would not be in line to receive sizable funding increases from the infusion of stimulus money, however. Because most stimulus allocations would be weighted toward poorer districts, prosperous ones would not get much.

About half of the 64 suburban districts, for example, would get less than \$1 million, with the smallest amount - \$69,300 - going to the Jenkintown district in Montgomery County.

Most of the money in the stimulus law, which President Obama signed last month, is required to be spent within months on projects that would lead to job creation. The education portion of the

stimulus money, however, is intended to be used to keep schools from making cuts they otherwise would be forced to impose because of shrinking budgets.

The governor wants \$418 million to go to what's referred to as basic education funding - the state's main subsidy for school districts. That amount would allow his administration to stay on track for its plan to increase basic education funding by about \$2.6 billion within six years.

That's the level Rendell says is needed to achieve funding equity among Pennsylvania's 501 school districts, based on a state study last year that determined the cost of providing an adequate education to children in all school districts.

The remaining \$310 million in what the federal law refers to as "stimulus stabilization" money would go to a spending fund that school districts could use on programs of their choice.

In commenting yesterday on Rendell's spending plan, Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R., Delaware) said the so-called stabilization money portion should not go into unrestricted programs that could run out of money after the stimulus aid is spent.

He said that if the money is earmarked for one-time expenses such as teacher training and building renovations, for example, that problem would not come up.

If the proposal is passed in its current form, the Philadelphia School District would get about 35 percent of the stabilization fund money - \$257 million.

Michael Masch, the school district's chief business officer, said last night he had not yet received the state's final stimulus package numbers.

It's too soon to say exactly how the money would be spent, Masch said, but it would likely go toward helping the district's five-year blueprint, which will cost about \$50 million over five years.

State Rep. James R. Roebuck Jr. (D., Phila.), chairman of the House Education Committee, said he had high hopes for the money Philadelphia would get.

"Hopefully, it will allow us to address some of the core issues in the district, like curriculum shortcomings and the lack of qualified teachers," he said.

But Pileggi said he thought the amount slated to go to the city was probably excessive. "I will insist on a fair allocation of those dollars to all of the districts in Pennsylvania - not starting with Philadelphia and dividing up the balance for the rest of the state," he said.

Among the other districts that would stand to get a substantial infusion would be the impoverished and academically struggling Chester Upland District in Delaware County, which would get about \$8 million.

Superintendent Gregory Thornton said the stabilization money would go for building repairs and possibly to reopen a school building. The basic education money, he said, would be spent on teacher training and summer programs.

Upper Darby would get the biggest stimulus boost in the Philadelphia suburbs - about \$8.1 million, more than 5 percent of its \$144 million budget. District Assistant Superintendent Louis DeVlieger said he would like to use the money to reduce local taxes.

"With the economy as it is right now, the main thing is to bring taxpayer relief," he said. "We are not looking to expand programs; we are looking to take the burden off their shoulders."

He said that because some of the stimulus money must be spent on programs that supplement or expand current offerings, "that is going to be a challenge."