



Some Berks school officials worry stimulus package funding increases will be fleeting

U.S. stimulus-package funds that account for most of increases will end in two years

By David Mekeel
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The new state budget inked Friday night will bring more than \$208 million to Berks County school districts.

But some school officials are worried that the funding increases included in the budget are fleeting.

Gov. Ed Rendell signed a state budget Friday night, ending the 101-day impasse and opening the flow of state funding.

School districts have been anxiously awaiting the cash because the state missed its first two basic education subsidy payments. Department of Education spokesman Michael Race said payments should begin arriving later this month.

The good news is, the new budget will provide increases in basic education funding, including more than \$19 million in Berks.

The bad news is much of the money being used for those increases comes from the federal stimulus package and will dry up in two years.

"You have to look at this in both the short term and long term," said Dr. Thomas R. Chapman Jr., Reading superintendent. "In the short term, we're certainly grateful for everything our governor and Legislature have done for us. The question we have is, if all the money is federal stimulus money, what happens in two years?"

Reading will receive the biggest chunk of state money in the county. The district's \$116 million in basic education funding reflects a more than \$13.6 million increase.

Chapman said the district had some plans for the stimulus money, which the U.S. Department of Education has said was supposed to supplement state spending. However, those plans likely will change because the federal money is being used to replace state funding.

"It puts us in a place where we have to re-evaluate what we're going to use money on," Chapman said. "It has to be sustainable."

Dr. Lawrence W. Mayes, Antietam superintendent, said his district also had plans for the stimulus money.

"What was an issue was the federal stimulus dollars, which we have earmarked for special remedial programs," he said, adding that he hadn't seen the final budget numbers. "Once we get the official totals and know what's coming, we'll be moving forward pretty quickly."

Dr. Robert L. Urzillo, Conrad Weiser superintendent, said his district was going to spend the stimulus money on a few construction projects. He warned that using federal money to subsidize basic education funding will leave the state - or school districts - in a precarious position down the road.

"What happens in two years?" he said. "It (the state) is either going to have to cut our funding or raise taxes. You need to be very careful how you spend this money because it's not going to be there in two years."

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