



Ten Key Questions about the 2010-2011 State Education Budget

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The next round of Pennsylvania's state budget process is set to begin when Gov. Rendell releases his budget on Tuesday, February 9. The following ten questions about education funding and accountability should be posed to the governor and leaders in the General Assembly. Are our state policy makers focusing on the right issues and keeping politics out of the classroom?

Question #1. Will the state continue to use the **basic education formula** adopted in 2008, which calculates and distributes adequate funding based on the unique circumstances of each district (enrollment, poverty, tax effort, district size, local cost of living)? Will this formula be changed in any way, and how will any such changes affect funding for the most disadvantaged school districts?

Question #2. How much will the state **phase in additional funding** for basic education above 2009-2010 levels? Will the state maintain its commitment to: (a) increase the state share of total education spending and relieving property tax pressures; and (b) enable each district to have the resources needed to provide every student - especially disadvantaged children - with a fair opportunity to learn and achieve under state academic standards?

Question #3. How will the state utilize the remaining **federal stimulus funding** for education, in excess of \$500 million? Will the state distribute these dollars to allow new investments and reforms? Or will the state use the stimulus funding to backfill for cuts in state dollars?

Question #4. What **other education line items** will be frozen, increased or cut, beyond basic education? In 2009-2010, the state cut more than \$150 million from dozens of other education programs, many affecting disadvantaged students and schools.

Question #5. **If cuts in state dollars are proposed** for public education: (a) how will these cuts put pressure on school districts to make up the difference by raising property taxes; and (b) how will the state make up this gap in 2011-2012 when the federal stimulus is gone? Note that the state already cut state basic education dollars by \$354 million in 2009-2010, which must be made up with state revenue to avoid a real cut after stimulus is gone in 2011-2012.

Question #6. Will the state pass pending legislation to **fix the state funding and accountability systems for special education** - House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940? The

reforms adopted in 2008 left out special education, although this remains the fastest growing cost for most public schools.

Question #7. Will the state maintain and strengthen the **accountability system for education funding** established in 2008, which requires districts to submit annual plans and budgets laying out how new education dollars will be invested?

Question #8. What are some of the **school improvements**, better opportunities to learn for children at risk of failing, and strengthened student outcomes that the state can point to as the result of new state investments in public schools in recent years, especially in disadvantaged communities?

Question #9. Under the state's basic education formula adopted in 2008 and maintained in 2009, more than 400 school districts received additional funding based on the number of local students who are **English language learners**. The total funding distributed through the formula to meet the needs of these students is over \$100 million per year. What is the state doing to make sure that the funds allocated for these purposes are being spent on programs that actually do meet student needs, such as adequate instruction in English as a Second Language, teaching adaptations in regular classrooms, and access to tutoring and after-school programs?

Question #10. If the state seeks to cut state dollars for education, how will this impact **school districts that can no longer increase property taxes** to make up the difference? Will the state take any action to improve the relationship between state funding for education and the pressure of local property taxes? Will the state consider proposals to relieve property tax pressures in financially struggling communities that are already burdened with excessive and unsustainably high local taxes? What is the long-run impact on community well-being, home ownership and municipal services, if the state fails to act on these issues?

Bonus Question. Will the state focus on **overall school reform policies** that comprise the basic building blocks for better teaching and learning for all students in all communities, such as adequate funding, smaller class size, better teacher quality, equitable distribution of quality teachers, effective academic interventions and supports for at-risk students, and modernizing libraries, science labs, and classroom facilities? Or will state officials instead focus only on unfunded mandates to change local school management without providing the building blocks for real success that are needed in all classrooms and schools?