

Bucks, Montgomery schools grateful for state money

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 23, 2016 6:15 pm

That sigh of relief emanating from school administrative offices around the state Wednesday was the result of Gov. Tom Wolf not standing in the way of a Republican-crafted budget.

While Wolf said he won't sign the measure, he decided not to veto it after meeting with concerned Democratic lawmakers this week. His non-veto will release \$3 billion being held in Harrisburg to cash-starved districts as early as next week.



(File) Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf

"This beats the heck out of us going broke," said David Baugh, superintendent of Centennial School District. "We were really worried about making payroll in June and July. This takes a world of pain off of districts across the commonwealth."

That includes the Quakertown Community School District, where Superintendent Bill Harner was directed by the school board to develop four budget scenarios, each based on a different amount of state funding.

"It's a relief and it changes our direction, but it still puts the unknown out there for next year -- and it's a big unknown," Harner said.

Districts will receive the same basic education subsidy as they did for 2014-15.

Damon Miller, president of the Morrisville school board, said the news was welcome because officials were "on the edge of their seat as each day passes."

"Luckily we haven't had to make any cuts," he said. "We've been able to maintain programs. But while we haven't needed to take out a loan or dip into the fund balance, we were coming to a point where those decisions would have to be made. So this is welcome news."

Wolf and the Republican-led Legislature were battling over his proposal to raise state sales and income taxes by about \$2.7 billion to fix a \$1.6 billion deficit and increase spending on education.

Wolf's decision allows the fight to continue into the 2016-17 budget, due in three months.

"I would hope as negotiations begin for the '16-'17 state budget year that we continue to focus on getting even more money to our traditional public schools," said Frank Gallagher, superintendent of Souderton Area School District.

However, another tug-of-war is brewing over the governor's plan to veto the fiscal code bill, which includes district reimbursements for construction.

It also calls for using the new basic education funding formula on new state money for education.

North Penn Superintendent Curtis Dietrich, who supports the new formula, said he's disappointed. "It does leave us in a bit of uncertainty."

State Rep. Bernie O'Neill, R-29, who chaired the committee that developed the formula, said it takes into account student population, poverty, special education, transportation and other learning issues when determining a district's subsidy.

"The fiscal code drives out money under the funding formula," he said. "There's language in the budget that says you can't drive out new education money other than the way it states in the fiscal code, so it will be interesting to see how it all works out."

Wolf said while he was allowing funding to go out to schools and other services for the short term, "we still face enormous problems that this budget does not even pretend to address."

Jeff Sheridan, his spokesman, said the fiscal code "contains unconstitutional provisions, guts important environmental regulations, and tries to establish legislative authority over issues that fall under executive jurisdiction."

Baugh, Centennial's superintendent, said, "I truly appreciate the governor's leadership in trying to address the structural deficit. Our children have become pawns. It was time to do the right thing. My hope is that the Legislature addresses the fundamental funding flaws and gets the entire state on the road to recovery."