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Despite Continued Fiscal Woes, Florida Dodges K-12 Budget Cut Lawmakers Use Federal Stimulus Aid as Budget Lifeline

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Despite fears that school funding would be cut amid a continued fiscal squeeze, the \$66.5 billion budget approved by Florida lawmakers this month for fiscal 2010 keeps overall K-12 spending at roughly the current level, with extra aid from the federal stimulus package playing a big role.

But some education advocates were quick to note that the budget still represents a decline in education spending from two years ago. And even as districts, on average, get a small increase in per-pupil funding, one high-profile program, the Florida Virtual School, will see a cut of about 10 percent in its per-pupil allocation.

Even so, Gov. Charlie Crist, a Republican, praised the work of the two legislative chambers, which are controlled by his party.

Mr. Crist, who last week announced plans to run for the U.S. Senate in 2010, also applauded lawmakers for approving the use of \$5.3 billion in federal aid made available to Florida under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, with some \$2.7 billion of that going toward education at all levels.

Some Republican governors have balked at spending portions of the federal aid, but Mr. Crist—and the state's lawmakers—have welcomed it with open arms.

In fact, the legislature approved the use of the federal money before receiving a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education giving the state access to a large chunk of the education aid. That waiver, needed because the state's financial support for public schools has dropped since 2006, was granted May 11.

A 'Triage Operation'?

In addition to using the federal stimulus dollars, Florida lawmakers adopted steps that, if approved by the governor, would bring in additional revenue, through measures such as a higher tax on tobacco and higher fees.

The final budget for fiscal 2010 would allot some \$17.9 billion for K-12 education, up by about \$5 million from the current level, a figure that combines state and local aid, as well as federal stimulus dollars. The average per-pupil funding amount across school districts would rise by about \$28, to \$6,873.

But that average level is down from a high of \$7,306 per pupil under the budget Mr. Crist signed two years ago. And overall K-12 spending is down by about 7 percent from the \$19.3 billion allotted in that budget.

“Considering where we were before the session started, we are fairly pleased with the outcome,” Wayne Blanton, the executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, said of the new budget package.

School districts have faced some difficult times of late. Over the past year, the state enacted two rounds of midyear budget cuts based on lower-than-expected revenue.

“Facing a really, really difficult budget year, we managed to patch together a budget that isn’t a disaster, but it’s by no means any progress,” said Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the Florida Education Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association. “There is a huge infusion of federal cash, ... so that’s kind of our little triage operation here.”

Meanwhile, the legislature passed a measure that would allow local school boards to charge an extra quarter mill in property tax with a supermajority vote of their members. That amount, equal to \$25 per \$100,000 in assessed value, could generate up to \$255 million total if all districts levied the increase, Mr. Blanton said.

“They kind of conveniently passed the buck to every school district in the state,” said James M. Warford, the executive director of the Florida Association of School Administrators. “It lets the legislature off the hook, and puts the school boards on the hook ... for raising the money.”

Many districts are expected to exercise the new authority to bring in needed resources.

Passage of the state budget came on the final day of a one-week extension of the legislature’s regular 60-day session. The Republican-controlled Senate approved the plan by a vote of 32-8. In the House, which Republicans also control, it passed 75-43, largely along party lines, with most Democrats opposed.

As of press time last week, Gov. Crist still had not signed the budget. He did get some welcome news, though, when the U.S. Education Department granted the waiver allowing the state access to some \$1.8 billion in education aid under the stimulus law’s state fiscal-stabilization fund.

To qualify for the stabilization cash, the law says, a state must be able to use its own money to fund schools to the level of state support provided in fiscal 2006. Then, the state must use its stabilization money from the federal government to backfill any cuts it made below that level and to restore funding to the fiscal 2008 level.

Cut for Online School

Although overall K-12 funding stayed about the same under the legislature’s budget, some categories of funding did see reductions, including the nationally known Florida Virtual School. Its per-pupil allocation was reduced by about 10 percent.

“We know some teachers will be asked to take on more students in their classes,” said Julie E. Young, the president and chief executive officer of the virtual school, which is based in Orlando and serves about 90,000 students online. “We also know that our course-development schedule will have to be modified due to fewer resources.

“Our top priority,” she said, “is to ensure that students continue to receive a high-quality education.”

A projected rise in the virtual school’s enrollment to 150,000 in the coming academic year was expected to help compensate for the lower per-pupil amount, however.

The state online school did avoid some new restrictions the Senate had been seeking to impose. Lawmakers backed away from a plan that would have limited state reimbursements to the virtual school for students’ online classes to core courses only. (“Fla. Budget Threatens Online Ed. Mandate,” April 29, 2009.)

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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