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Thornton Boosts County Education Funding

The Prince George's County Public Schools will receive more than \$682 million in state education aid in the current fiscal year, a report by the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance reveals. The total represents an increase of more than \$82 million, or 13.7 percent, from fiscal 2005.

The extra money constitutes the fourth installment of a planned six-year major boost in funding under the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002, commonly known as the Thornton plan. The report is based on updated figures from the Maryland State Department of Education using final enrollment data from the previous school year. Several categories of Thornton funding are determined by formulas based on enrollment.

Overall, the budget adopted at the end of the 2005 session of the General Assembly in April increased funding for public primary and secondary education statewide by almost \$378 million, or 12.4 percent. Total state spending for public education in fiscal 2006 will be more than \$4 billion.

Prince George's will be the top recipient of state education funds this year. Baltimore City will receive \$647.6 million, Baltimore County \$362.4 million, and Montgomery County \$289.2 million.

The Prince George's figure could have been higher, but Governor Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. did not request and the legislature did not add money for the "geographic cost-of-education index," a provision of the Bridge to Excellence Act. Under an assistant state attorney general's ruling, GCEI funding is not considered to be mandatory, unlike the rest of the Thornton plan. Failure to fund the GCEI cost Prince George's about \$21 million it otherwise might have received.

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In addition to the \$3.4212 billion allotted for Thornton programs, the state will spend another \$597 million on its contribution to the teachers' retirement program, non-public special education, and other programs, bringing overall education spending in fiscal 2006 to \$4.0182 billion.

Prince George's also will benefit this year from a substantial increase in public school construction spending. In January and February, the State Board of Public Works allocated about \$121.9 million to the various counties for public school construction, with Prince George's receiving \$7.912 million. The General Assembly later added another \$128.1 million to the pot, bringing the statewide total to \$250 million. Prince George's will receive \$21.921 million of the additional money. Its total allocation for fiscal 2006 of \$29.833 million is second only to Montgomery County's \$30.431 million.

The Prince George's figure represents 39.3 percent of the county's request for \$75.874 million for school construction and renovation – a higher share than Montgomery County received (28.1 percent) but well below the shares of other major jurisdictions such as Baltimore City (99.6 percent), Baltimore County (89.8 percent), Anne Arundel County (61.9 percent), and Howard County (52.3 percent).

“Together with the small increase in education spending by the county, this dramatic infusion of state dollars presents Prince George's with a significant opportunity to improve its school system,” said Alliance Executive Director David Merkwowitz. “The challenge now for the Board of Education and the administration is to ensure that the money is invested wisely and accounted for properly so that it benefits the 139,000 children whose futures they have in their hands.”

The Prince George's Business-Education Alliance is a nonprofit research and policy analysis organization whose membership includes more than three dozen leading county businesses.