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Extending education funding program could be hot debate in Annapolis

Thornton plan targeting areas with poor children is set to expire in 2008
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by Guy Leonard
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Prince George's County business and education leaders are calling on the legislature to continue hefty, annual funding increases to the county's schools to ensure support for programs aimed at improving academic performance.

Schools Superintendent John Deasy joined members of the Prince George's Business Education Alliance in making the appeal for more money. They said even the prospect of a \$500 million state budget deficit, which analysts project for fiscal year 2008, should not alter the state's commitment to education as a top funding priority.

The alliance advocates extending a statewide funding formula known as the Thornton plan, which has been used to increase aid to schools since it was adopted in 2002. This plan uses a wealth calculation formula that favors jurisdictions with large numbers of poor children, such as Prince George's and Baltimore city. It expires in fiscal 2008.

Prince George's is scheduled about \$850 million by fiscal 2008, which begins July 1 from the Thornton plan.

The next highest recipient is Baltimore City with \$792 million.

Overall, the state will provide about \$4.5 billion a year to the 24 school districts in Maryland in fiscal 2008.

“[The end of the Thornton plan is] going to have a very detrimental effect on sustaining these initiatives,” Deasy said. “That’s unless we think about a Thornton II.”

“We’re going to fail to see the increased funding that districts have become accustomed to... you won’t lurch back but you certainly won’t grow.”

The Thornton plan is named for Alvin Thornton, a former Prince George's school board chairman who headed a statewide commission that devised the funding formula.

David Merkowitz, head of the Prince George's Business Education Alliance, said the Thornton funds, also called the Bridge to Excellence, rightly provided money to districts with large numbers of impoverished students, students with special needs and students with disabilities, since there are extra costs associated with providing them with a good education.

“The Bridge to Excellence is [still] not enough to do what needs to be done,” he said.

Del. James Hubbard, (D-Dist.23) of Bowie, who has served as the county delegation’s education liaison, says members of the Prince George’s delegation already have renewing the Thornton plan on their radar.

“All the people I’ve talked to have it [extending Thornton] as their top priority this year,” said Del. James Hubbard, (D-Dist.23) of Bowie. “I don’t think anyone’s going to let Thornton sunset.

“I think there are going to be many people putting in proposals to extend Thornton out for five more years.”

Hubbard agreed that student achievement gains, teacher retention and many other of Deasy’s initiatives could be in jeopardy without an extension of Thornton funding.

But Del. Doyle Niemann (D-Dist. 47) of Mount Rainier said that to continue funding the Thornton plan past its expiration date would break the financial legs of the state.

“The Thornton increases with Medicaid have taken all the state’s money over the past five years,” Niemann said. “The state has its own constraints and I don’t see [education funding] going up in the same fashion as it has.”

Niemann said that to extend the Thornton plan would mean cutting funding to basic services like roads, parks, social services and law enforcement.

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