

Ohio Senate budget would raise school funding

Critics say funding would still not be as high as in the past, and as needed

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By Jo Ingles

Ohio senators are calling their new budget plan “a work in progress. Still, they're touting it as a major improvement in funding for Ohio’s public schools.

Ohio Senate President Keith Faber says his members have made funding for K-12 public education in Ohio a top priority in this budget. He says it dedicates \$717 million more for schools over the next two years.

"The numbers are even larger when you consider the total education spending, but that \$717 million is just direct aid to school districts, Ohio’s public school districts, making it the largest of any General Assembly commitment in the last decade," Faber says.

More money per student

Republican state Sen. Chris Widener says the basic amount the state spends per pupil in Ohio’s schools increases under the GOP plan.

"This drives an additional \$284 million in FY14 (Ohio's Fiscal Year 2014) again, going specifically in the foundation formula line item to our public school districts in Ohio and \$434 million in FY15," Widener says.

The budget also sets aside more money for specific programs such as preschool education

"We are going to make additional investments in early childhood education," Republican Sen. Randy Gardner says. "Thirty million dollars over the biennium for early education support for pre-k. This will be high quality education, early childhood education."

Third-grade guarantee?

The senators say their plan sets specific dollar amounts to fund things like the third-grade reading guarantee, a plan that requires all students to reach a certain level of literacy by the third grade or they would be held back.

The plan also raises caps on school districts so that they can get more local money before the state starts to reduce its funding. Faber says this plan equalizes school funding in a way that has not been done and he thinks this complies with the DeRolph ruling that said Ohio's way of funding schools is unconstitutional.

"We are effectively trying to reduce the differentiation between school districts," Faber says. "Remember, DeRolph didn't say you can't rely on property taxes. But what it says is you can't

have a system that disproportionately provides inadequate resources to poor districts and rich districts don't seem to have that problem."

Not up to past levels

Innovation Ohio, a liberal-leaning think tank, has been critical of the way the Republican Legislature has funded schools in the past. Stephen Dyer, the education policy fellow for that group, says he has not had a chance to look at the numbers in the Senate's plan, but he suspects the plan still does not give enough money to schools.

"It looks like it's more money than what districts got in the last school year. But what they got in the last school year was a lot less money than what they got in the previous school year. So I think that it is fair to say that right now, given the amount they are talking about, it looks like districts are going to be dealing with fewer resources than what they had four years ago," Dyer says.

Additionally, Dyer says it makes him a little nervous when he hears lawmakers talking about earmarking money to specific programs.

"My main concern is anytime you start earmarking money for specific programs because the amount of money is not adequate," Dyer says, "you are going to be removing programming money in other areas to pay for these specific areas. And that can harm kids."

Dyer says he will probably have more to say about the Senate's plan as he mulls it over in the coming hours. Lawmakers say they will probably be tweaking some things in the plan between now and next week.

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