

Preschool tab pushed on P'burg

Commissioner reverses decision; shuffling ordered to fund state-mandated program.

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By LINDA LISANTI
The Express-Times

PHILLIPSBURG -- The school district is appealing a state ruling requiring it to yank \$835,000 from core curriculum programs and apply the money to early childhood education the state won't fully fund.

The ruling by state Education Commissioner William Librera comes as a double-whammy for Phillipsburg, which is scheduled to get just \$1.27 million of the \$11.2 million it sought in separate state supplemental aid.

Librera recently rejected the requests by five special-needs school districts for more than \$7 million in state funding for early childhood education programs.

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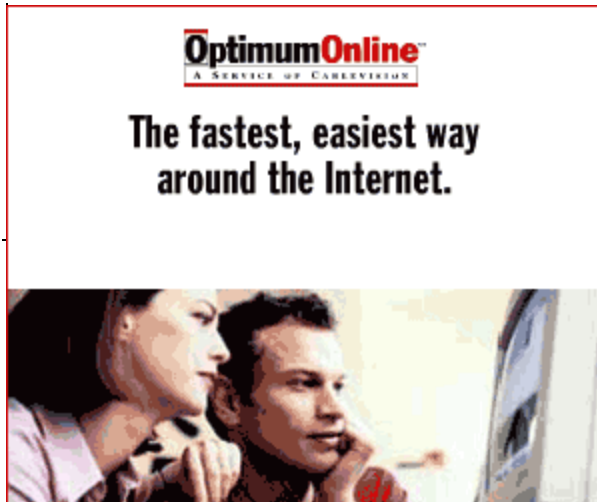
Instead, he ordered Phillipsburg, Neptune, Passaic, Millville and Pemberton to transfer funds from their core curriculum programs -- such as language arts, math and science -- to make up the difference.

All five Abbott districts are filing an appeal of the commissioner's decision to the appellate division of the New Jersey Superior Court.

The Phillipsburg School District has been guaranteed \$3.5 million in state preschool funding, but still is facing an \$835,000 deficit, Business Administrator Bill Poch said.

In May, an administrative law judge ruled the state should fully fund Phillipsburg's preschool program, but the commissioner vetoed the judge's decision, saying it was a local responsibility.

"Now, the state wants us to come up with a plan of how to pay for our preschool program. I really don't know if we have an answer to that question," Poch said.



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As part of the Supreme Court's Abbott vs. Burke ruling, the state's 30 special-needs districts must provide full-day preschool.

David Sciarra of the Education Law Center -- which was involved with the court case that established the Abbott program -- says the commissioner's ruling defies the Abbott mandates, which state the poorest school districts must be funded in line with the richest.

This includes funding preschool.

"The court has repeatedly ordered the state to pick up the full cost of preschool in Abbott districts and prohibits using funds dedicated for K-12 classrooms to pay for preschool," Sciarra said in a statement he issued last week.

"The commissioner's actions, if not overturned, will weaken core instructional programs for all Abbott children," he added. "This is a mandate the state must pay for."

Phillipsburg Superintendent Gordon Pethick agrees.

"Preschool is supposed to be fully funded by the state. That's the law," Pethick said. "That's why we're appealing the decision."

Phillipsburg's preschool appeal is separate from the district's appeal of its state supplemental funding.

As one of the 30 Abbott districts, Phillipsburg is entitled to apply for additional state funding to support local and state-mandated programs. Phillipsburg asked for \$11.2 million in aid for this school year.

Last week, an administrative law judge ruled Phillipsburg should get another \$809,000 in addition to the \$1.27 million that's already been promised from the state.

Poch said district officials are still waiting to hear from Commissioner Librera on whether he will uphold the judge's ruling or overturn it as he did with the preschool funding.

If it is upheld, the district will get more money for in-class support teachers, preschool handicapped teachers, instructional aides, legal fees, supplies and materials and \$48,855 to continue the district's lease of the National Guard Armory for its kindergarten classes. Reporter Linda Lisanti can be reached at 610-258-7171 or by e-mail at llisanti@express-times.com.

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