



## Stimulus means more \$ for schools, strings attached

### Many school districts challenged by stimulus

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It's like winning the lottery, but then being told how the money has to be spent.

Even so, Derby Superintendent of Schools Stephen Tracy will take the \$565,684 his district is getting for tutoring, special education and preschool under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

In Bridgeport, the windfall of stimulus funding amounts to \$14 million over the next two years, but will do little to lower class sizes and can't be used to hire back teachers laid off over the summer. It will, however, mean big business to some technical software companies and the promoters of Total Learning, a program that offers extra instruction and social services for the city's youngest students.

In both Milford and Stratford, where officials are determined not to be left with a program the regular budget can't sustain once the federal stimulus dollars peter out, the lion's share of the Title I money will be used on tutoring and teacher training.

In all, the state received roughly \$780 million in federal stimulus education dollars for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade efforts.

The lion's share, about \$542 million, will be used by the governor and General Assembly to maintain current Education Cost Sharing funding levels to cities and towns. Another \$71 million is distributed

to school districts for existing Title I reading and math programs: \$138 million will go toward special education and preschool. The governor also doled out \$336,000 to 13 school districts to help homeless children. A couple of other competitive technology, school improvement and lunch program grants have yet to be disbursed.

Thomas Murphy, a state Department of Education spokesman, said there was a fair amount of disappointment among school chiefs around the state about the strings tied to the money. Title I money must be used for purposes that improve instruction and can't replace any local expenditure. The special education, or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, money can be spent with a little more flexibility. At least 50 percent of the new money can be used to defray other local costs as long as there is no reduction in special education spending.

The state has most of the money in hand and has begun to draw against it for municipalities whose spending plans have been approved.

Bridgeport got its IDEA application approved, but has been asked to make some revisions to its Title I proposal.

"It's normal and nothing that will prevent them from getting approval (within a week or two)," said Murphy.

Because the funding is not continuous, Bridgeport will use its additional \$6 million in IDEA money to provide more psychological services and testing to its kindergarten through second grade population as well as teacher training to all K-2 teachers, said John Di Donato, the city's assistant superintendent for youth development.

The hope, he said, is to do a better job assessing

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young children who may be in a crisis situation to determine if a special education referral is appropriate or some other short-term intervention.

The teacher training will strengthen the district, even after the money disappears, as long as the newly trained teachers don't leave the district.

The district's Title I funding, intended to aid disadvantaged students catch up academically, grows from \$12 million to nearly \$20 million with the stimulus money.

Cynthia Fernandes, Bridgeport's executive director of teaching and learning, said the money will help expand Lexia, a computer-based tutoring program used now in just kindergarten. It will be offered through sixth grade. The program allows students to work on weak reading and math skills. In addition to the software, teachers will be trained in how to use it.

The money will also expand Total Learning, a program runs in conjunction with Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the city's largest Head Start provider. Total Learning infuses art, music and dance into the curriculum, assigns an aide in the classroom, offers a longer school day and gives students and their parents extra help. It is now in more than a dozen kindergarten and first grade classes. Stimulus dollars will expand it into 22 preschool classes with a total of about 400 students.

"We believe as a district it is a really excellent early childhood initiative. If we can catch kids at the base, by the time they get to third grade, we'll be doing better with test scores," Fernandes said.

Fernandes also plans to hire three "instructional specialists" who will be on call to assist classroom teachers in the seventh and eighth grades

districtwide. She said middle school learning communities in the new schools have struggled. There wasn't enough money to merely lower class size, she said. There was a need to be creative.

She said restrictions of the grant wouldn't let the district buy books, but it could get CDs that went with books. It couldn't hire replacement teachers, but can train the teachers now on staff.

"It's like taking an aspirin that makes the pain bearable," she said. Given no restrictions, the funds might have been spent differently.

In Derby, Tracy said the district will use its \$343,000 in IDEA money to establish a new program at the elementary level for autistic children. The program will be small, for about two to three children. The money will also help offset the cost of raises for the special education staff. The new Title I money, about \$208,000, will buy a third certified reading teacher at Irving Elementary School and allow the school to run an after-school tutoring program. The idea is to train and employ Derby High School kids to do the tutoring, thus giving them after-school jobs and something to put on their college resumes while the students they tutor get a "big brother or sister."

Tracy said there is a concern about what will happen with the new programs once the money runs out. "These are children we're obligated to serve one way or the other. Unless the feds renew the commitment or unless the economy improves to the point where local tax dollars can fill that gap, then we'll have a problem in 2011 or 2012," he said.

While others grouse about the strings attached to the stimulus money, Tracy said he appreciates that the new money was put into existing programs where the ground rules are fairly well known.

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Given that the money is temporary, Stratford Superintendent of Schools Irene Cornish said the district's new \$574,000 in Title I money will go toward making both elementary and secondary teachers better at teaching reading. They plan to use a program run by Yale University. Stratford will also invest more heavily in reading and special education tutors.

In Milford, Clifford Bugyi, supervisor of administrative services, said the \$377,000 in new Title I money will be used to create before- and after-school math classes at West Shore and Harborside middle schools. A similar program offered in writing a few years back showed impressive results, said Bugyi.

Stimulus for schools Here's what the region's school districts will receive through the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In most cases, the money can be spent over a two-year period:

DISTRICT	TITLE I	IDEA	PRESCHOOL	
HOMELESS*	Ansonia	\$440,327	\$696,008	\$27,772
	Bridgeport	\$7,835,142	\$5,957,269	\$12,310
	Danbury	\$980,663	\$2,392,281	\$237,286
	Derby	\$208,499	\$343,541	\$94,690
	Easton 0	\$232,955	\$9,236	\$13,644
	Fairfield 0	\$2,494,458	\$92,966	\$2,349,133
	Greenwich 0	\$1,637,371	\$64,799	\$98,729
	Milford	\$377,262	\$373,828	\$0
	Oxford 0	\$30,744	\$777,539	\$0
	Seymour	\$169,204	\$493,129	\$19,526
	Shelton 0	\$45,417	\$1,147,981	\$0
	Stamford	\$142,616	\$3,609,554	\$1,558,476
	Stratford	\$64,385	\$1,628,363	\$574,808
	Trumbull 0	\$77,471	\$63,889	\$1,614,215
	Bridge Academy	\$60,449	\$132,754	\$0
	Park City Prep	\$67,885,607	\$67,275	\$0
	Achievement First	\$5,089,013	\$336,688	\$132,971,468

\*Homeless grant was awarded by the governor's office. SOURCE: STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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