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Legacy doesn't concern Rendell

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Gov. Ed Rendell is doing a bus tour of the state to talk about next year's budget. At a stop Saturday at Roosevelt Elementary School in south Allentown, Rendell spoke to about 100 people on what will happen in classrooms when the \$654 million in education stimulus cash vanishes. After his speech, Rendell sat down with The Morning Call to discuss education, a hallmark of his administration.

Q: What do you think your legacy as governor will be?

A: I'm not very concerned about legacy. I'm more concentrating on what we do in the last eight or nine months. I think basically we've pushed a progressive agenda. We've dragged Pennsylvania into the 21st century, sometimes kicking and screaming in the Legislature. We are the number one state in the union in educational achievement, according to the Education Research Council. That's a far cry from being 40th best educational system when I took over. ... Fiscal stability: The Wall Street Journal just released a study that said we are one of only 10 states that can be considered fiscally stable, and the only big state in the union and the only northeastern state to share that designation. Health care: We've doubled the amount of seniors in our PACE and PACENET program. We now have every child in Pennsylvania [with] access to affordable health care ... So these are the important things I think we've achieved. If people want to do the legacy game those are things I think we'll be remembered for. Also being the first governor to actually bring property tax relief after the last five have promised. We did it through gaming ... And also in an era when corruption seems to be the byword in Harrisburg, I've been governor seven years and two months and not one person in my administration has been arrested or indicted or charged with any offense involving corruption or embezzlement or anything like that. That's something to be proud of.

Q: Did you go into office knowing education would be a top priority?

A: Sure. Our national test scores were so low, I knew it was something we had to do. If you recall, the first budget stalemate in 2003 was over my push to put over half a billion dollars into early childhood education. As you'll recall, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that didn't give a dime to early education, not withstanding the science that shows it's such an important part to overall student achievement.



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Q: The costing-out study drastically altered the way schools are funded. Its aim was to close the funding gap between rich and poor districts. Do you think that will continue in the next administration?

A: This year we'll take the third step towards the six-year, maybe seven-year, plan to fulfill the goals of the costing out study, I'm sure of that. I don't know what's going to happen, obviously, behind me. It's going to be tough for the next governor because we are going to lose the stimulus funding. It's why I made the presentation inside, and it's why we are striving to create the Stimulus Reserve Fund (a rainy day fund to make up for some of the loss).

Q: Last year you proposed eliminating 400 of the state's 500 school districts as a way to save costs. That idea, however, died at the podium. Should it be revived?

A: Sure. We should consolidate our municipalities [too]. We have far too many municipalities and we have far too many school districts. It costs us money. It's ineffective. It's inefficient. And it creates a very unequal spending ratio for students.

Q: Auditor General Jack Wagner has called for a ban on derivative swaps in school districts and local governments based on an investigate story The Morning Call did that showed how Bethlehem Area School District lost money. Do you agree with Wagner?

A: The problem is sometimes it depends on the overall financial condition of the markets. I know when I was mayor of Philadelphia we used swaps much to our advantage. It generated a lot of additional revenue or actually reduced a lot of the interest payments that the city had to pay. So when the markets are good, swaps are good. When the markets are not so good, swaps can be very damaging and dangerous. I don't know if an across-the-board, absolute prohibition is a good idea. But some of the school districts are totally over their heads and don't really have the financial expertise to determine if it's a good or bad time to do the swaps.

Q: The federal Race to the Top grant puts a lot of emphasis on merit-based pay. Is merit pay a fad or the beginning of a fundamental shift and should unions fight it?

A: Unions should agree to it. I think what we should do with merit-based pay is what I've recommended: Base pay should remain the same or base pay should be negotiated. But there should be merit bonuses for those who significantly improve student achievement both at the teaching level and at the principal and administrative level.

Q: Why do you think the state needs Keystone graduation exams when 11th-graders already take the PSSAs?

A: If we had a rule that if you weren't proficient in either math or reading in the PSSAs you couldn't graduate, that would be the standard we need. But many of our high school students don't achieve proficiency on those tests and still graduate. We need standards. We are not doing our kids a favor putting them out there with diplomas when the diplomas don't mean much. Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education colleges report that two out of five graduates of Pennsylvania high schools come in and cannot do basic reading in their freshmen year. We've got to raise standards and as we raise standards we've got to raise achievement and performance as well.

Q: Does the public put too much of the blame on "failing schools"?

A: It depends on how you define "failing schools." It's not just low test scores. It's failure to make improvement. You can't judge a school in a high poverty area and say, 'Well, 40 percent of the kids were not proficient so the school is failing.' But if after two years the administration and teachers have not taken that 40 percent down to 35 percent then maybe they are failing. That's how you should base it, on improvement or lack thereof. Not on just the raw data, but are you making progress. Â... To say that a school's failed because a high percentage of the kids are not proficient, that's unfair because obviously kids bring all the baggage of their home environment into the classroom Â... We now tutor over 100,000 kids in our Pennsylvania schools, mostly in our lower grades. It gives them extra attention with a teacher for every five to six kids, and it works to increase proficiency in math and reading at every grade level. So tutoring extends the school day. Frankly, if it was up to me we'd extend the school year as well because I don't think kids go to school enough.

Q: You said you cannot legally touch the pensions of public employees, but should the system be changed for new employees?

A: Yes. We should reduce the benefit level. We should reduce when those benefits accrue. We can't afford it. It's going to break school districts and the state. It was a giveaway. Interestingly, everyone got upset at the [2005 legislative] pay raise. The pay raise cost the taxpayers about 1/500th of what this [2001] pension grab is costing. And no one got mad at Gov. Ridge. No one got mad at the Legislature back then. I guess it's because the impact is phased in over so many years. But this is a tsunami compared to the pay raise.

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