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## Schools dig into stimulus arithmetic

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Woodland Hills Superintendent Walter Calinger has lots of ideas on how to improve the school district.

Now, thanks to the federal economic stimulus bill, he will have extra money -- an estimated \$4.6 million this year -- to help pay for some of them.

"The stimulus money just comes at the right time," Dr. Calinger said.

The Woodland Hills school board this month approved plans -- at least some of which might be helped by stimulus money -- to open a comprehensive learning academy, extend hours at the high school for some students, allow high school students to take free college courses and combine elementary and intermediate schools.

Across Pennsylvania, at least [\\$2.6 billion](#) in federal stimulus money will be doled out -- for early childhood, elementary and secondary, and higher education -- with the goal of using it by Sept. 30, 2011.

Local school district leaders are developing ideas that could meet the federal and state guidelines without kicking up districts' ongoing costs when the money runs out.

"It's a godsend to us," said Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt. "It's perfectly timed because we're really through the first phase of analyzing what we're succeeding at and where we need to make extra effort."

While the district hasn't decided how to spend the estimated \$43.2 million it will receive this year, Mr. Roosevelt said, "The likelihood is there will be significant extended time on learning, likely focus on middle school and likely focus on literacy."

If the district does use any of the money for school renovation, he said, the top priority likely would be career and technical education.

For those who are hoping the closed Schenley High School building will be renovated, Mr. Roosevelt said, "There's not monies sufficient to bring a project of that magnitude to the table, nor is it consistent with the very clear Obama administration edict that the money be used primarily on student gains."

Districts may receive a portion of their money in the coming weeks, but Pittsburgh, like some others, doesn't expect to start spending it immediately because planning needs to be done.

The U.S. Department of Education plans to release half of the special education money and half of the money for Title 1, a program aimed at improving math and reading achievement of low-income children, by the end of the month.

Federal guidelines call on states to make that portion of special ed money available to local schools by the end of April and the Title 1 money to be awarded to local schools "as quickly as possible, consistent with prudent management."

The state Department of Education's list of estimated amounts from the stimulus package, known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, includes specific amounts for basic education subsidy in 2009-10 and in 2010-11.

Some are still urging the state to change some of the proposed allocations, including James Testerman, president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association, who would like to see some stimulus money used to address a looming pension issue.

The state is advising school districts to treat the basic education subsidy increases "as being built into the state's funding base" and for ongoing services.

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### Billions for Pa. school districts

The state Department of Education estimates that Pennsylvania's school districts will receive these amounts in federal stimulus funds:

- \$418 million for basic education subsidy in 2009-10.
  - \$735 million for basic education subsidy for 2010-11.
  - \$317 million for state fiscal stabilization grants, including modernization, renovation and repair of facilities.
  - \$383 million for Title 1, aimed at improving achievement of low-income students in math and reading.
  - \$384 million for special education.
  - \$12.6 million for technology upgrades
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The current proposal calls for stimulus money to cover all of the increases in the basic education subsidy for the next two years, using an equity formula that is being phased in.

After that, it will be up to the state to continue funding any increases.

The rest of the money is for one-time expenditures that do not need to be sustained and is to be used by Sept. 30, 2011.

"I don't think you're going to see a lot of districts going out and starting a lot of expensive new programs or hiring a lot of new teachers," said Tim Allwein, assistant executive director for governmental and member relations of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

He said schools are more likely to buy new textbooks, update science lab equipment, improve libraries, "things that sometimes get left behind in years districts have limited funds."

By the time the money runs out, Dr. Calinger said, Woodland Hills may have improved enough to attract students back, reducing the district's costs for charter schools and school busing.

Mr. Roosevelt said he thinks Pittsburgh may be able to compete for additional money after the stimulus is over because he expects the school system's innovations will prove effective.

Both the federal and state governments have put restrictions on how the money can be spent. The state Department of Education conducted online seminars for school leaders last week and earlier posted a guide at [www.pde.state.pa.us/stimulus](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/stimulus).

School districts that receive basic education subsidy increases greater than inflation must spend at least 80 percent on specific "proven academic programs," including pre-kindergarten, extended school day or year, tutoring, class size reduction and new curricula.

Permitted expenditures also vary by category. For example, only subgrants from the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund can be used to modernize and improve school facilities, and technology improvement money can't be used for early childhood education.

Thelma Szarell, superintendent of the West Greene School District, which is estimated to receive about \$1 million this year, hopes to spend some of it to add computers and buy a site license for Fast ForWord software to improve literacy skills of high school students.

She said it would cost about \$75,000 initially and \$4,500 a year -- which the district could budget -- to sustain it.

She has been looking into the program for a few years, but said, "We've never been able to participate because we just never had that kind of startup money."

Some school officials plan to see whether they can cover some school renovations with part of the money.

David Goodin, superintendent of Connellsville Area School District, which is expected to receive about \$5.9 million this year, said the district already was in the midst of a feasibility study of its high school, including a look at the roof, boiler and other problems.

Connellsville also is considering trying to use some money to bring the shops in the career and technology education program up to industry standards.

Mr. Goodin said the district's financial picture already was sound without the stimulus money, but said, "To us, the stimulus money is kind of like a shot of adrenalin."

Fran Serenka, superintendent of Sto-Rox School District, which is expected to get about \$1.7 million this year, said the district is looking at ways to round out programs supporting both academics and behavior. Ideas include adding another literacy and math coach for the secondary level and adding more drills and practice in math and language arts.

McKeesport Area School District -- which is expected to get about \$4.6 million this year -- is reviewing its strategic plan and facilities plans.

"There are so many different things that we have in our plans that we haven't been able to fund that it won't cover them all," Superintendent Shirley Golofski said.

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One possibility is buying more assistive technology, such as communications devices, for special education students. Another is more professional development for teachers.

Jeannette School District, which is expected to receive about \$1.5 million this year, is exploring ways to support reading in the primary grades and possibly expand a high school literacy course, Superintendent Sharon Marks said.

"You don't want to spend it before you know you have it. We're constructing a budget as if we don't have it. It'll be a nice boost," she said.

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