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PA Senate approves limited school funding,  
Gov. Rendell threatens veto.

By PETER JACKSON

Associated Press Writer

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP, July 29) - Senate Republicans and Democrats clashed Monday night over Gov. Ed Rendell's agenda as the GOP majority pushed through a bill to provide \$4.3 billion for public schools without including any money for early-childhood initiatives that the Democratic governor is demanding.

The Senate sent the bill to the House on a party-line vote of 28-19. But while Rendell threatened a veto, it appeared unlikely that either the Senate bill or a similar House bill would even reach his desk.

Instead, Monday's maneuvering left the school-subsidy money in limbo about a month before the first round of subsidy checks for the 2003-04 school year is due to go out to the 501 school districts.

The Senate recessed indefinitely, and House leaders said they had no immediate interest in taking further action on the legislation.

"We've done our job," said Robert C. Jubelirer, R-Blair, the Senate president pro tempore.

Steve Miskin, spokesman for House Majority Leader Samuel H. Smith, R-Armstrong, said House leaders have "no intention" of calling the House into a voting session until an agreement is reached with the Democratic administration.

Earlier Monday, Rendell appealed to senators in a letter to stay and complete "unfinished work" that consists largely of his agenda items, including the early-childhood plan, the legalization of slot machines to raise \$1 billion

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for property-tax relief and a \$5 billion economic-stimulus program.

"It is always tempting to put such decisions off," Rendell warned, "but delay will only compound the problems we face."

Senate Majority Leader David J. Brightbill, R-Lebanon, responded with a letter to Rendell in which he said the Senate has "worked diligently" to advance Rendell's priorities but that "many significant differences remain."

"We will continue to work collaboratively and will reconvene the Senate as soon as it is productive to do so," said Brightbill, who suggested at a news briefing that Rendell could maintain his political leverage by using his line-item veto authority to approve only some of the subsidy money and reject the rest.

Rendell vetoed the entire \$4 billion appropriation for schools from the \$21 billion budget that he signed in March, so he could use that as leverage in negotiations over his ambitious agenda. His spokeswoman said Monday night he would veto any subsidy bill not accompanied by money for expanded preschool programs, full-day kindergarten and reducing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade.

"He's not abandoning schools. They (GOP leaders) are abandoning the need. They're abandoning the will of the people" that was expressed in Rendell's election victory in November, said the spokeswoman, Kate Philips.

The Senate bill would increase subsidies for basic and vocational education by 2.5 percent, boost special-education funding by 4.5 percent and provide an additional \$25 million to the Philadelphia School District \_ as would the House bill. The Senate bill differs from the House bill in detail, including an additional \$15 million for the Head Start program that is not in the House bill.

Republicans said school districts need the state subsidies now and pointed to studies that show Pennsylvania teachers are the highest-paid in the nation and that Pennsylvania's expenditures per pupil are also among the highest.

"The people of the commonwealth are very, very generous when it comes to spending on public education," said Senate Majority Whip Jeffrey E. Piccola, R-Dauphin.

Democrats said the schools are in desperate need of the kind of improvements Rendell proposes.

"Is this the best we can do with the scarce dollars that we have?" asked Sen. Allyson Y. Schwartz, D-Philadelphia.

Also Monday, the Senate approved a bill to reduce the maximum blood-alcohol level for drinking drivers from 0.10 percent to 0.08 percent, and to require repeat offenders to have ignition interlock devices installed in their cars for one year. The legislation is required by the federal government, and the state risks losing \$11 million in federal highway funds unless it acts by Oct. 1.

The House version of the bill would go further, setting up a tiered system of punishment that would impose harsher penalties, such as increased prison time and fines, for repeat offenders and drivers with excessively high blood-alcohol levels.

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