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*From The Morning Call*

## House action on a state budget holds out mostly false hopes

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Earlier this week the state House approved a \$1.1 billion tax hike and education spending plan in an effort to break the long public school budget stalemate. Pennsylvania is the only U.S. state without a completed budget for the current fiscal year. House members voted 104-95 to increase the personal income tax by 16 percent on Jan. 1, 2004. Only 25 "yes" votes came from Republicans in the GOP-controlled House.

Will your state personal income tax increase from 2.8 percent to 3.25 percent next year? Who knows? The bill went to the Republican-controlled Senate, where both parties said they wouldn't pass it as is.

Gov. Ed Rendell has been negotiating almost exclusively with House Republicans to put together a compromise to finally get the state's 501 school districts funded and to pay for some educational reforms. All along, we've supported his proposals to reduce class sizes, add tutoring, fund all-day kindergarten and provide money for Head Start. There's about \$250 million in the House package for these things.

But the reforms won't mean anything if the schools start closing for lack of funds. The school districts already have missed the first school subsidy payments in September because of this budget crisis. The next checks are supposed to go out a week from today. Cash-poor districts may start closing if they don't get them.

However, nobody in the Senate is impressed by the House action. Many see it just as a way to pressure Senate Republicans by making them look like the bad guys if schools go to four-day weeks, for instance. But even Senate Democrats are urging their Republican colleagues to reject the House bill. Senate Minority Leader Bob Mellow, D-Lackawanna, and Sen. Vince Fumo, D-Philadelphia, say the Rendell administration has failed to seek input from them. They don't want their caucus members to vote for tax increases unless it's a vote on a final package. This clearly isn't.

Senate President Pro Tempore Robert Jubelirer, R-Altoona, says, "I have no intention of saddling taxpayers or my constituents with that kind of burden." Mr. Rendell called the House bill "a historic compromise" but he can't get even his party members together. It took \$300 million in "walking-around money" to get necessary votes. Handling of the education budget has been botched by all parties. The shame will be if keeping the schools open becomes the fall-back and passed off as success. Then, improving the schools and reforming property taxes will be impossible.

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