

Lawmakers ignore Quinn, add millions back to budget

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SPRINGFIELD - What Gov. Pat Quinn took away, the Illinois Legislature is giving back.

Lawmakers restored millions of dollars in their final drafts of the education and human services budgets that the governor had cut from the 2012 spending plan.

But they also trimmed hundreds of millions of dollars from the budget that Quinn presented earlier this year.

Quinn made headlines and raised eyebrows in February when he suggested that the state stop paying for regional school superintendents, which totaled \$12.6 million this year. The governor zeroed out that portion of the budget for next year, but lawmakers returned \$11.3 million in their draft.

State Rep. Will Davis, D-Homewood, who helped craft the education budget, said lawmakers feared that doing away with regional superintendents would cost the state more than the governor's cut would save.

"When we talked to the State Board of Education, they were fearful that if the regional superintendents go away that they would then have the responsibility to provide all of those services. So they were panicked, feeling there was no way they could provide those services," Davis said. "So, there was actually some disconnect between the governor's office and the State Board of Education."

The \$11.3 million includes salaries and nearly \$2 million in grant money. Rock Island Regional Superintendent Jim Widdop said the grants alone used to be \$12 million, but any funding is better than nothing.

"The regional offices have always found a way to do what needs to be done. But the question is quickly becoming how much more can we do with less?" Widdop asked.

Lawmakers also returned millions of dollars that Quinn wanted trimmed from schools' transportation budgets. The governor wanted to spend \$175 million on school buses, but lawmakers increased that to slightly less than \$295 million.

Dan Cox, superintendent of the Jasper County School District, said that with gasoline costing about \$4 per gallon and a fleet of aging buses, he will need every dollar he can get.

"It's needed. (The transportation money) is desperately needed. We travel 680,000 miles a year with our 56 buses," Cox said. "Some of them are 14 years old."

But Alene Reuschel, superintendent of the Macomb School District, said how much the state plans to spend does not matter. What the state actually spends is what's important.

"It doesn't matter what the total dollars are if the state can't pay us what they owe us," Reuschel said.

Robert Walsh, of West Chicago, said he thought the state had taken care of paying the bills with the 67 percent personal income tax increase enacted earlier this year.

"I thought the tax increase was supposed to take care of all of this," Walsh said. He was at the Illinois Capitol on Wednesday to watch his 14-year-old son, Brenden, be a page in the Illinois House.

Walsh said he has watched the budget debate, and he isn't thrilled with Illinois' state of affairs.

"I'm not very happy with any of it," Walsh said. "I don't think I get my money's worth from all that I pay."

State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, said she heard plenty of people say they wanted more from the state. In response, she restored 27 different pieces of the human services budget that Quinn zeroed out in the final draft she helped craft.

"He chose to take pharmaceuticals away from senior citizens; we put it back. He chose to take relief away through the Circuit Breaker (program); we put it back," Feigenholtz said. "We want services and dollars and assistance to get to the people who have earned it, paid for it and worked for it their whole lives."

Specifically, lawmakers added \$1.98 million for funeral and burial services for low-income families; the governor had scratched that program from his budget. Quinn also zeroed out money for the Children's Place, a museum, and crisis nurseries that provide emergency shelter for women with babies and young children across the state. Lawmakers added \$487,500 and 100,000, respectively.

The numbers are included in budgets from the Illinois House. State senators have their own plan, both of which have yet to be voted on.

Feigenholtz said compromise is likely, but she expects a final spending plan to be close to her numbers. She said too many people worked too hard to produce what she hopes will be a "fair" budget.

"There is not one person under this Capitol dome, after reviewing the human services budget, that likes it, including all of the members of the committee. No one is happy here," Feigenholtz said. "That is because everybody shared pain in the human services budget. Everybody."