A Comparative Analysis of the Pennsylvania Senate and House 2015-2016 Budget Proposals

Where we are

As of December 10, 2015, the 2015-16 Pennsylvania Budget is still not done. Two different budgets are now before the General Assembly.

The first implements the budget framework agreed to by Governor Wolf and the leaders of the four caucuses in the General Assembly. It passed the Senate as SB 1076 with bi-partisan support. It continues to be supported by the Governor, and large majorities of Senate Republicans and Democrats and House Democrats.

The second, which passed the House as HB 1046 on an almost straight party line vote, is supported by House Republicans.

The two proposed budgets and the 2014-2015 budget, organized by department can be found here. SB 1076 calls for spending $30.8 billion, while HB 1460 calls for spending $30.26 billion. (Although, as we point out in a technical addendum, the on-budget spending is SB 1076 is about $330 million less than $30.8 billion.) In this brief, we provide an overview of the differences between the two budgets, looking first at critical differences in spending for education and human services, then at the impact of those differences, and finally at some subtleties in how the two budgets organize and present certain spending choices they have in common and how this affects the bottom line budget numbers.

Critical Choices

There are critical differences in the spending priorities found in the two budgets, especially with regard to education, human services, and job training and economic development.

Education

Restoring education spending is the most important goal of the Wolf administration and is the area where the greatest differences between the bi-partisan Senate plan and the House Republican plan can be found.

- The bi-partisan Senate budget includes a $350 million increase in basic education funding. The House Republican budget provides a mere $100 million increase in basic education funding and $50 million for the Ready to Learn block grant program, which only provides help to select districts.
- SB 1073 includes $30 million for early childhood education ($25 million for Pre-K Counts and $5 million for Head Start) not found in the HB 1460.
- The Senate bill provides $20 million more in special education funding than the House bill.
- SB 1073 includes an additional $8 million for initiatives in career and technical education over the HB 1460.

**Human Services**

The bi-partisan Senate bill spends $94 million more on human services than the House Republican bill. Included in that $94 million is:

- $18 million more for County Assistance Offices.
- $22 million more for Mental Health Services.
- $4 million more for Behavior Health Services.
- $406,000 more for Centers for Independent Living, which support disabled Pennsylvanians.
- $2.4 million more for the State Food Purchase program (food banks).

**Economic Development and Job Training**

Governor Wolf proposed substantial new funding for programs that both train people for the jobs of the future and seek to support new businesses. The bi-partisan Senate bill provides some funding for these programs. The Republican House bill provides far less. These differences include:

- $11 million more for Infrastructure and Facilities Improvement Grants.
- $11 million more for Industrial Resource Centers.
- $14 million more for the Pennsylvania First program.

**What the numbers mean**

Sometimes it’s hard to wrap our heads around big numbers and understand what they mean. And when we’re talking about really big numbers, such as the $30 billion plus that Pennsylvania will spend under either budget, it is can be hard to grasp the difference that $10 million, or even $100 million, makes.

So let’s put the differences between these budgets in context.

Much of the Pennsylvania budget remains unchanged from year to year. Schools have to open. Health care, especially that mandated by federal programs in which Pennsylvania takes part, has to be provided. The State Police is not going to be disbanded.

But, within the margin for change, the budget decisions made by the Governor and General Assembly are critically important, as we’ve especially seen in the area of education in recent years.

*As of last year, funding for Pennsylvania’s classrooms remained $572 million below what it was in 2011-2012. And the differences in school funding between rich and poor districts in Pennsylvania were wider than any other state in the country.*
These reductions in classroom funding caused school districts to close schools, increase class sizes, and end music, arts, and other educational enrichment and sports programs. And it led to 33,000 lost jobs in public education, with devastating effects on our economy.

The House Republican budget would reduce this gap only by $150 million. The bi-partisan Senate budget supported by Governor Wolf would not close the gap entirely either. But it would be a big step in the right direction, setting the stage for further progress in the future. And the result would be new teachers, smaller class sizes, more school nurses, and a restoration or expansion of art, music, and technology programs.

Similarly, an additional $10 or $20 million spent in the area of human services allows for thousands of therapists, counselors, social workers, and case manager to be hired. These trained professionals provide critical services to our family members and neighbors who truly need assistance.

**Conclusion**

There are other differences between the SB 1076 and HB 1460. Our aim in this brief, however, has been to help citizens and advocates fairly compare the two budgets and to understand some of the ways in which SB 1076 provides additional spending much needed by Pennsylvanians in the areas of education and human services.