

State Seeking Hardship Waiver, Education Funds

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Florida Education Commissioner Eric Smith will share a stage today with the person who must decide whether Florida will qualify for as much as \$2.2 billion in education-related stimulus funds.

Smith's public get-together in Washington with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will occur at a forum on data-use in education.

That topic is unrelated to uncertainty over whether Florida will get a major category of stimulus funding for which Florida does not now, technically, qualify.

Duncan must determine whether to give Florida a special waiver so that it can receive that \$2.2 billion share of funding contained in the massive \$787 billion American Recovery and Investment Act signed by President Barack Obama last month.

Aides to Smith and Arne would not discuss Monday how often - if at all - the two men have already gotten together privately to discuss the issue or whether they might discuss the matter publicly today.

Despite uncertainty over whether Duncan will grant the waiver, Gov. Charlie Crist and his budget staff continue to operate on the assumption that Florida will ultimately get its \$2.2 billion share of the education stimulus dollars.

For now, though, Florida technically remains ineligible for that money because it has not maintained kindergarten-through-12th grade spending levels in recent state budgets, a prerequisite tucked into the language of the stimulus bill.

Federal education officials insisted Monday the process for granting Florida a waiver for the aid has not formally begun.

Still, there exists widespread optimism among state officials that Duncan is inclined to do so.

Both of the state's U.S. senators, members of the House and state lawmakers are among those who have been pressing Duncan in letters to grant Florida a pass because the stimulus bill allows waivers in cases of hardship.

Asked Monday if there were any specific news or progress on obtaining a waiver, Crist confirmed, "Not as yet."

But he added, "We're encouraged by some of the comments we heard the Secretary Duncan make last Friday in Miami. If I remember the quote - I'm paraphrasing a little bit - but he said 'we really want to help.' That kind of attitude is exactly what we need and what Florida students deserve. So I'm hopeful."

In fact, Duncan has been stressing there is an urgency for cash-strapped states such as Florida to receive their portions of the stimulus money that are ticketed for education.

On Saturday, Duncan announced that \$44 billion in stimulus funds to schools nationwide will be distributed in 30 to 45 days, and an additional \$49 billion will be available within six months.

"These funds," Duncan said, "will be distributed as quickly as possible to save and create jobs and improve education, and will be invested as transparently as possible so we can measure the impact in the classroom."

Whether Florida's budget troubles represent the "hardship" necessary to obtain a waiver seems not to be open for debate.

Crist's budget for 2009-2010 includes \$1.1 billion of the anticipated education money - \$225 million for higher education, and \$880 million to shore up K-12 school operating budgets.

Crist's spending plan describes that \$880 million as an increase in funding per student next fiscal year.

Jerry McDaniel, budget director for Crist, acknowledged to lawmakers last week, however, that with the expected plunges in property tax collections, the infusion of federal stimulus cash will likely only maintain per-student dollars at current levels.

McDaniel reiterated to lawmakers that Crist expects federal education officials to grant Florida the waiver it needs to get its federal education dollars.

If those officials drag their feet too long, Florida lawmakers may have to make an educated guess about whether the state can count on the money.

Meanwhile, the debate continues - mostly among state Republicans - about whether and how to use the federal money, because it will dry up in two years.

Despite those concerns, however, Steve Wise, who oversees pre-K-12 education spending in the Senate, says he still wants Florida schools to get their share of federal bailout for states.

To that end, he, too, penned a plea on March 6 with Evelyn Lynn, chairwoman of the Senate's higher education budget committee, urging Duncan to grant Florida its share of the education stimulus money.