

Schools Get Money Lift

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This week, incoming schools chief John E. Deasy plans to hold his first news conference in Prince George's since being hired. Deasy's start date is May 1.

Even before he starts, Deasy has received a fiscal boost. County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D) last week recommended full funding of the school board's requested \$1.5 billion budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Typically, county executives trim school board requests by at least several million dollars.

But Johnson unveiled a budget plan that would increase school spending \$127 million over the current year's total. That's a 9 percent jump. The budget now goes to the County Council for approval.

Budget watcher David R. Merkwitz of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance pointed out that much of the proposed \$127 million increase is out of Johnson's hands. State and federal dollars will flow every year to the county system regardless of Johnson's actions. Or they won't flow -- witness the state's unfunded "geographic cost of education index." It's likely that the county school board's budget will have to be cut by \$14 million because state leaders have not funded the index. Such money is supposed to offset higher-than-average operating costs in jurisdictions like Prince George's.

The significant issue is how much county-controlled funding Johnson proposes for the schools. Johnson's budget shows the county's share of school spending would be \$602 million. That exceeds the state-required minimum county contribution by \$40 million. That's not chump change, and school officials were elated. But it's not \$127 million, either.