

ECU educators discuss issues related to Leandro ruling
By Paul Dunn, The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, November 02, 2005

It's an educational tug-of-war played with a two-headed snake named Leandro.

On one end: the state Board of Education, General Assembly and governor; on the other: local school districts that resent being told how to spend their state funding.

Both groups are trying to satisfy requirements of the 1997 Leandro ruling – named after student Robert Leandro – that constitutionally guaranteed North Carolina students "a sound basic education."

That's the message Philip Price, associate superintendent for finance with the state Department of Public Instruction and Robin Johnson, the department's principal legislative analyst, brought to a group of East Carolina University educators Tuesday. Price and Johnson were in Greenville to discuss the ruling and its possible financial consequences for local school districts.

Price predicts the state's "Disadvantaged Student Supplemental Funding Allotment," a component of the Leandro-fueled state Board of Education plan that funds opportunities for lower-income students, will cost \$220 million to \$300 million to implement.

Under the DSSF funding formula, Pitt County is considered at less risk than other counties and probably will not receive DSSF funds for several years, Price said.

Less fortunate counties haven't seen much help yet, either, Johnson said, referring to Leandro's lengthy journey through the court system.

"It's been a very long case, and the plaintiffs aren't particularly happy at this point," Johnson told 25 ECU faculty members assembled at the Willis Building.

On the heels of Gov. Mike Easley's executive order in July that authorized spending up to \$75 million on education projects and programs, East Carolina University educators hope they can help charm the snake before it bites school districts facing tougher financial scrutiny and more focused accountability.

During a give-and-take session Tuesday, ECU education faculty expressed their willingness to help county school administrators determine how to meet standards set in the Leandro ruling.

Price enthusiastically embraced the offer.

"ECU is in a great place to help craft solutions for student performance and build better teachers and principals," he said. "You can provide school systems with research that will help them. We would love to have school districts work with universities."

The case was originally filed by families and boards of education from five low-wealth school districts. The districts challenged the method by which the state divides education funding, claiming that it created an unequal, inadequate education in poor and predominately rural counties by relying on local property taxes to supplement funding for necessary expenses.

Six urban high-wealth school districts joined the lawsuit, claiming that the system of funding was also unconstitutional because it didn't address the disproportionate number of students in their districts who need extra resources and services because of poverty, language barriers and handicaps.

In a 1997 ruling, the state Supreme Court called on the state to address funding disparities for school districts in economically distressed areas. Easley's July mandate offers \$22.5 million to help 16 struggling school districts – Pitt County is not among them – assist students and hire teachers. It also provides another \$16.6 million to help poor school districts without sufficient funding.

Price doesn't expect movement on the reforms until the next legislative session in May.

"It's like turning the Titanic," he said.