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Welcome

Posted on Tue, Apr. 1, 2008

Blind boy pleads with N.J. lawmakers not to cut services

SAVE AND SHARE



TOM HESTER Jr.
The Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. - Rocco Fiorentino is worried, but his concerns extend beyond what most 11-year-old children fret about.

He worries about simply being able to read.

The Voorhees fifth-grader is blind and fears plans to cut \$600,000 from the state Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, about a 6 percent cut.

So the Signal Hill Elementary School student visited New Jersey legislators Tuesday and pleaded with them to restore the money.

"Gov. Corzine said the cuts are designed to protect the most vulnerable in our society, but they do not protect me," he said.

Corzine has proposed cutting state spending by \$2.7 billion to try to fix troubled state finances.

Rocco, though, said cuts could affect services that blind and visually impaired children get to learn Braille, the writing system that uses dots read with fingers to help blind people.

"Without Braille, I could not function in school, I could not read books and, most importantly of all, I may not ever be able to get a job," he said. "This cut will affect me and many other blind children across the state of New Jersey. It will mean we get less Braille services and less Braille teachers coming to help us at our schools."

Rocco, blind since being born four months premature at 1.5 pounds, said blind students already only get three hours of weekly Braille instruction.

"Imagine if your sighted-children had a blindfold on for seven days a week and only took the blindfold off for three hours a week," he said. "How long would it take them to learn the alphabet and read print?"

Lawmakers made no promises to restore the money, though Assembly Budget Chairman Lou Greenwald, D-Camden, praised Rocco's efforts and Assemblyman Gary Schaer, D-Passaic, said he was for "putting a human face" on budget woes.

"Rocco, you may be blind but you were certainly extremely effective today," Assemblyman Declan O'Scanlon, R-Monmouth, told the youngster.



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Suzanne Esterman, spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services, said the budget cut could mean the loss of 54 jobs at the commission.

"But our firm intent is not to impact any client services," she said.

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