

Senate sees changing face of school support

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"By and large it is our mess, not the mess of children sitting in our classrooms," she said during first-round debate.

But before the bill passed, it ran into a veto from Gov. Mike Johanns. The \$22 million - later determined to be about \$19.3 million - posed competition for his proposed direct property tax rebate program.

Johanns would have supported the bill, though, if an amendment giving the state more control over how much state aid schools receive had passed.

That amendment, offered by Kristensen, would have allowed the Legislature to appropriate more or less money than the amount certified by the Department of Education.

Paraphrasing Johanns' words, the governor's press secretary, Chris Peterson, made an analogy.

"This is about who drives the bus," he said. "LB149, as it is currently written, asks the governor and the Legislature to take a seat on the bus while the computer drives the bus."

Senators who spoke in favor or Kristensen's amendment agreed. Their fear was that state aid would be locked into the budget.

After the Legislature voted to override his veto March 23, he said LB149 would not provide predictability and stability - two buzz words used by both Johanns and Bohlke during months of debate.

"It just simply doesn't," Johanns said. "Stability won't be there."

But John Deegan, superintendent of Bellevue Public Schools, said stability should depend now on state government's support and not on changing the formula.

"If the Legislature does not continue to support state aid, you'll see property tax issues rise again," he said. "It's all based on how much they're going to fix the problem."

Bellevue would have received about \$300,000 less in state aid for the if LB149 had not passed. With its passage, according to Department of Education numbers, Bellevue lost an additional \$422,749.

But Deegan said the school received more federal dollars, offsetting the state aid loss.

"The system worked the way it was supposed to," he said. Schools that have more resources should not receive as much state aid, he said.

But Jerry Phillips, superintendent of Petersburg Public Schools, disagreed.

Before LB806 passed, he said, Petersburg had received about \$245,000 a year in state aid. When LB806 passed, that number jumped to \$615,232 for 1998-1999.

Had LB149 not passed, Petersburg would have received only \$89,239 for 1999-2000. But even with its passage, it will receive only \$110,553. Phillips said Department of Education officials have told him that if his school's enrollment remains around 60 students, the school will receive between \$100,000 and \$150,000 a year.

To help make up the difference, he said, a guidance counselor is opting for early retirement, the school did not renew a contract with a Spanish teacher it shares with another district and the school will use the music teacher as a guidance counselor. Phillips himself is leaving so the school can save \$25,000 by hiring a part-time superintendent.

In addition, citizens voted for levy override. The school can go over the \$1.10 limit by 43 cents, he said.

The board also went through the school's budget, he said, and slashed spending on furniture, equipment, supplies, books, computers, software and other items. All told, he said, the budget reduced by \$247,000 in personnel and expenses.

"You can't say the reductions aren't going to affect things," Phillips said.

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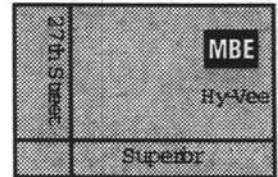


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