

Special ed funding change passes in Pa. House

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Special education funding reform is now before the state Senate after a bill that would greatly change the funding formula was passed by the House.

The House last week overwhelmingly approved a bill, 173-25, that would move Pennsylvania away from a flat funding method.

State Rep. Will Tallman, R-Reading Township, was the lone York County dissenter.

Tallman said he supports increased special education funding but believes the state is adding too much additional oversight.

School districts have been getting special education funding based on the assumption each district has 16 percent of its total enrollment in special education. That formula has been in place since 1991, according to state Rep. Mike Sturla, D-Lancaster, who developed the bill.

Under the proposed legislation, school districts would receive funding based on the number of special-education students they have, as well as on factors such as district poverty level.

A district can't have its funding decreased as a result of the bill -- there's a measure to prevent that, even if the district has less than 16 percent of students enrolled in special education.

The General Assembly would decide in each year's budget how much to appropriate for special education, and the new formula would be used to figure out how much districts get.

York City School District would likely be the biggest winner if the bill is passed, as its poverty and special education level -- nearly twice the 16 percent rate -- would greatly increase funding.

The bill is now before the Senate.

State Sen. Pat Vance, R-Cumberland, said she has many questions about how issues of "over-identification" will be dealt with.

Over-identification is the concern that districts could, in theory, identify more students as having special needs in order to get more money.

The bill includes a call for the state to conduct reviews of districts that have large increases in special-education numbers.

Sen. Jeffrey Piccola, R-Dauphin, the education committee chairman, said he has not looked at the bill in depth enough to comment.

Help provide services: The bill has a three-tier system in how districts can classify their special-education students for funding purposes, so that districts with more students with more extreme needs are eligible for additional funding.

Schools are already required to provide special-education services for any student who needs them, regardless of cost, whether that means a classroom aide or a specialized school in a different town with 24-hour care.

Some districts just don't have the funding for that or can only offer bare essentials, and, unless a parent can successfully sue them, the child might not get the proper services, said attorney Baruch Kintisch.

Kintisch is the director of policy for the Education Law Center, a Philadelphia-based legal advocate group promoting the rights of public school children. The bill would help solve those inequities, he said, and get better funding to schools.

"They just can't do everything they want to for the students with disabilities. It's heartbreaking," Kintisch said.

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