

Legislators massage money for area school allotments

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Usually, money bills are simple for state legislators to deal with. Just split the difference, give everyone something, cut deals 'til you get a majority, then go home.

Not so with next year's school aid bill last week in the Michigan Senate. All sorts of rock-solid principles are inviolable: subsidies to church-related schools, "reform" measures, tax bills.

"It's a very partisan bill," complained Democratic Sen. Jack Faxon of Farmington Hills.

"We've added \$800 million to the bill. We're adding costs like they're going out of style," complained Sen. Harry Gast, R-St. Joseph, appropriations chair.

The school aid bill — which senators will continue debating this week — will be a landmark law. For the first time in state history, state government will bear most of the \$9-billion cost of public schools. And lawmakers are working on it 11 months in advance of the date it takes effect.

— Instead of ramming it through at the last possible minute.

What happens next week may set precedents. Four issues were debated last Thursday.

'Subsidies' fight

Hottest issue was what Democrats called "siphoning" — allowing students in a parochial school to take a course like physics or gym in public schools.

"It's a subsidy of a private school," said Faxon, arguing parochial students would take courses with the most expensive equipment. "It would be the equivalent for non-public schools to locate in public school district facilities so they can use them for free."

"It really is a subsidy to let private education slide in on the ex-

pensive classes," agreed Lana Pollack, D-Ann Arbor.

"It's a solid part of the Republican agenda — the destruction of public schools," said Virgil Smith, D-Detroit. He called GOP plans for vouchers, choice and charter schools part of the "sleight-of-hand trick of siphoning."

To Republicans, it was simple justice — continuing the practice of letting non-public students use facilities their parents helped pay for.

"The part-time pupil is protected. You make it sound like they aren't paying the taxes," replied Republican Gil DiNello of Macomb County, sponsor of the amendment.

Sen. George McManus, R-Traverse City, said that in the parochial school he attended 50 years ago, one student wanted to take art, six physics and one woodshop. "So we walked four blocks over to the public school. We had excellent cooperation," McManus said.

DiNello's amendment was adopted 23-7, with eight not voting. Among area senators, Faxon voted no.

Opting out of sex ed

The Senate also adopted DiNello's amendment to let parents and guardians "opt out" of sex education for their children. DiNello said it was necessary for "parental rights and parental control."

Faxon deplored it. "Children are required to be educated on how not to get communicable diseases like AIDS," he said, arguing the amendment allowed parents deliberately to choose ignorance. "It is denying knowledge of self-protection. That's a form of (child) abuse."

Sen. Joe Conroy, D-Flint, said

committee testimony showed gonorrhea and syphilis cases were up 200 percent in Michigan. Conroy, father of five, said he never told his children about sex because "we didn't know how. The classroom is the place to learn it — not the gas station or anecdotal information from their peers."

DiNello's amendment was passed 15-12 with 10 abstaining in an unrecorded vote.

'Floor' raised

On a vote that split the parties, the Senate raised the per-pupil foundation grant — the so-called "floor" for the poorest districts — to \$4,800 from \$4,500.

That amendment was sponsored by the state's three northernmost senators — McManus; Don Koivisto, D-Ironwood; and John Fridnia, R-Hubbard Lake.

"It'll cost another \$140 million," objected Faxon, "and it doesn't affect anyone in southeastern Michigan. The lowest schools get 10 percent more. The middle range get 3 percent. The top get 1 percent."

Faxon argued that differentials in state aid are needed because housing, medical care, wage levels and insurances all cost more in southeastern Michigan. "A home in Escanaba costs a lot less than in Birmingham. Insurance costs less in Ontonagon than in Oakland County. Equity? This (amendment) is gross," he said.

Replied Koivisto: "Our computers cost the same. Our energy costs are the same. Our transportation costs the same."

The amendment passed 15-9, with Republican Robert Gouke of Northville joining Faxon in voting against it.

Refer to Senate Bill 887, the 1994-95 school appropriations bill, when writing to your senator, State Capitol, Lansing 48913.

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