

House committee nixes incentives plan for school

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The House Education Committee shot down a key bill in Gov. James Blanchard's school quality program — a system of incentive grants to improve schools.

Opposition cut across party lines and across city-suburban lines, noted chairman William Keith, D-Garden City.

"I just don't like it," said Rep. Nelson Saunders, D-Detroit, who abstained. "This says 75 percent (of buildings) would receive no monetary reward even if they're successful under this bill."

THE VOTE Tuesday on House Bill 4444 was 8 in favor, 9 against, with 2 not voting. Ten votes are needed to report it to the House floor.

Yes votes came from Keith and a scattering of Detroit and outstate members.

Voting no were Reps. James Kosteva, D-Canton, Lyn Bankes, R-Livonia, and a vocal William Bryant, R-Grosse Pointe.

The bill still unfunded, would give \$15 million to the state Department of Education to reward up to 25 percent of the buildings in any one district for a three-year program of improvements.

Sponsor is freshman Rep. Ted Wallace, D-Detroit.

Tuesday's vote came on a substitute version that reduced the state's rule-making power. But it still failed to satisfy some committee members.

REPUBLICANS, joined by Kosteva, removed a section requiring an improvement plan to be approved and signed by the local superintendent and the president of the teachers' union. Only the local school board would have to approve it.

"I don't see the superintendent or the president of the union having veto power," objected Rep. Susan Grimes Munsell, R-Howell. "I don't feel the staff should have the right to override it. Isn't that why we elect a

school board — to represent the taxpayers and parents?"

"It should be a collaborative effort," said Rep. Alma Hallworth, D-Detroit, favoring the union president veto.

Added Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Memphis: "We've got to have everyone on board. You're imposing work conditions on the bargaining unit (with a school improvement plan).

COMMITTEE MEMBERS were doubtful about operating details.

"What does 'at risk' mean?" asked Rep. Terry London, R-Marysville.

"I really can't speak to that," answered a staff member from the Department of Education, adding that there are nationwide attempts to identify pupils who are at risk of dropping or failing the moment they enter school.

"We are actually diluting the dropout program," said Rep. Claude Trim, R-Waterford. "I'll vote no."

Keith said the Appropriations Committee has talked of funding the \$15 million program by folding in the current \$10 million dropout program and finding \$5 million in other new money.

"I like the concept of rewarding excellence," said Rep. Nate Jonker, D-Cllo, "but let's put the money where we need it. . . . We already have proven categoricals," he said, referring to programs for pregnant teens, drugs and transportation.

THERE WAS an undercurrent of Republican resentment at Blanchard's effort to put his name on a program administered by a department under the control of a separately elected State Board of Education.

In his state of the state address, Blanchard said:

"We must begin to reward success, not just prop up failure. If we want high quality, we should reward it. . . .

"I have proposed the Governor's Achievement Incentive to reward in-

dividual schools that raise the performance level of their students or decrease their dropout rates through the use of school improvement planning.

"Recipients of GAIN funds will be recognized as shining examples for other schools to follow. A merit awards program almost identical to GAIN was just proposed by President Bush to encourage educational excellence across the nation."

What schools may GAIN

"GAIN" stands for Governor's Achievement Incentives — an estimated \$15 million the first year in rewards to school buildings, not districts, for improvements.

A local school board would present the Department of Education a plan for improvement. The state would score:

- 40 percent for improvement in academic performance.

- 20 percent for improvement in attendance rates.

- 20 percent for reducing numbers of dropouts.

- 20 percent for other indicators — college entrance, participation in school clubs, an increase in graduates placed in jobs, and so on.

(It is expected, but not decided, that a \$10 million school dropout program would be folded into GAIN.)

No more than 25 percent of the buildings in a district could receive a grant in one year. The average grant is expected to be \$15,000.

The grants must be spent on "discretionary school improvement" approved by the school board, "but shall not supplant regular school funding."

Sources: House Bill 4444 and discussion by members of the House Education Committee.

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