

School equity bill gives more to poor districts

By Tim Richard
staff writer

State Rep. William Keith won a major political victory this week when the state House of Representatives took \$600 million in "categorical" aid to well-off school districts and spread it around to poorer districts.

"This is what I propose to break the trend," said Keith, D-Garden City, chair of the House Education Committee. Under his bill, 78 percent of Michigan's 582 school districts will receive state aid next fall compared to 70 to 72 percent in 1985-86.

Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, was among many suburbanites casting a loud no vote.

"There is a persistent notion that equity is more important than quality," said Berman, whose home district spends more per pupil than virtually any other in the state.

"There's no new money (for schools) put in this budget. All they did was take from out-of-formula

districts and spread it over hundreds of districts."

She accused the House of making its goal "across-the-board mediocrity."

THE HOUSE passed, with a bare 56-vote majority, Keith's substitute for the state Senate's \$3.15 billion school aid bill.

The bill now goes to a crucial conference committee — three members from each chamber — to iron out differences.

Essentially, Keith's bill takes \$650 million the state paid for school districts' Social Security, pensions and categorical (media centers, pregnant teens, professional development) and pumps it into the general aid formula, making more schools with more pupils eligible for state aid.

"Continually, major newspaper editorials and out-of-formula people say they don't get any state money for their schools," Keith said. Actually, such districts as Bloomfield Hills, Birmingham, Southfield, Farmington, Livonia, South Redford

and Plymouth-Canton don't get general state aid but do get retirement and categorical aid.

No immediate breakdown was available on how the bill would affect individual districts' budgets.

KEITH SAID Michigan's current policy "funnels millions of dollars into wealthy school district budgets that otherwise would go into the formula to narrow the gap between the wealthy and poor school districts."

"We do not pay the employer's portion of Social Security and retirement for any other local unit of government — cities, townships, counties, etc."

By funding categoricals, Keith said, the state has seen more and more districts go out-of-formula and be forced to raise local property taxes.

The gap between what rich and poor districts can spend per pupil has grown to the point where Michigan is in danger of a lawsuit by poorer districts, he said.

Keith cited Kentucky, where a court declared its school funding unconstitutional. Kentucky, he said, has adopted the system similar to what he's advocating — putting most of the money into the general aid formula and taking it out of categorical.

Among Observer & Eccentric area lawmakers, only Justine Barnes, D-Westland, voted with the majority for Keith's bill.

AMONG THE 29 no votes besides Berman were John Bennett, D-Red-

ford; Jan Dolan, R-Farmington Hills; Mat Dunaskis, R-Lake Orion; David Hoenigman, R-West Bloomfield; Judy Miller, R-Birmingham; and Wilfred Webb, D-Hazel Park.

Among 29 not voting were Lyn Bankes, R-Livonia; James Kosteva, D-Canton; Gerald Law, R-Plymouth; and Gordon Sparks, R-Troy.

"In spite of asking for 2 1/2 years," said Berman, "no one can tell me what it costs to educate a child. How much does it cost for quality education? We don't have a figure."

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