

# Intelligencer Journal

## **Bill alters special-ed funding**

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The state House has approved a new funding formula for special-education services, but the bill doesn't include the mandated funding increases hoped for by some school officials and advocates for the disabled.

In fact, the bill's sponsor, state Rep. Mike Sturla of Lancaster, said state special-ed subsidies are likely to be frozen at 2008-09 levels for the next two years.

What House Bill 704 would do is assure that whatever money is available for special-education services each year goes to the school districts that need it most, Sturla said.

The legislation, approved last week by a 173-25 vote, would replace a 19-year-old funding formula that assumes all school districts have the same percentage of special-education students — 16 percent.

Using that formula, the state awards an additional subsidy — this year it's about \$3,500 per pupil — for each special-education student.

For years, school officials have complained that the formula is inequitable, penalizing districts with larger percentages of special-needs pupils and rewarding those with fewer students.

HB 704 would base the subsidies on the number of special-education students with mild, moderate or severe disabilities enrolled in each district over the previous three years.

It would guarantee that districts receive at least as much funding as they received in the previous year.

And it would require schools to provide documentation each year of how they use state special-education funds.

Currently, districts must file reports only once every three years.

Missing from the legislation is any reference to how much money districts will receive.

An earlier version of the bill called for establishing a base special-education funding level and increasing that by about \$32 million per year to fill a \$380 million special-ed funding gap identified in a 2007 "costing-out" study.

That would have brought about \$1.8 million in additional subsidies to Lancaster County schools in the first year.

But that provision was stripped from the bill, Sturla said, because of the state's economic woes.

Pennsylvania expects to end the year with a \$1.2 billion deficit, and it made no sense to mandate funding increases the state can't deliver, he said.

Special-education funding was frozen this year at 2008-09 levels, and Sturla predicts no increases for 2010-11 and possibly 2011-12.

Prior to this year's funding freeze, increases were below the rate of inflation, ranging from 1.3 percent to 2.7 percent.

Meanwhile, special-education costs have skyrocketed.

In Columbia Area School District, expenditures surged by 43.5 percent from 2005-06 to 2009-10, rising from \$2.3 million to \$3.3 million, said Laura Cowburn, assistant superintendent for business services.

Over that same period, Columbia's state subsidy for special education grew by just \$59,000, or 5.3 percent, she said.

Lawmakers are aware that special-education services are underfunded, Sturla said, and he expects more state money to be pumped into the pipeline once the economy recovers.

"We're funding such a pitiful amount of the cost of special education that no one with a straight face could say we're adequately funding it," he said.

Even without the prospect of an influx of additional money in the short term, school districts like Columbia, with a special-education population ranging from 21 percent to 23 percent, stand to benefit from the bill.

So does School District of Lancaster, where just under 20 percent of students are identified as special-needs pupils.

Urban districts tend to have a higher percentage of students requiring special-education services and are required to provide the services regardless of state funding levels, said Carole Clancy, SDL's director of special education and health services.

"As a result, the burden falls upon our taxpayers to fill the gap in funds."

More equitable funding "will allow us to provide more support to our teachers, which will allow us to provide more support to our students," she said.

"It definitely provides a sense of optimism in this tight budget time."

Sturla said he doesn't expect the state Senate to take up the bill until after the Legislature adopts the 2010-11 budget.

The earliest the new formula could take effect would be the 2011-12 school year.