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Administrators hope bill will bring fairness to special education

By Amy Crawford
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A bill that would change the way state special education funding is distributed to school districts was approved by the House of Representatives yesterday, giving hope to administrators who say the system shortchanges districts with the most special needs students.

"This is a good day," said Ed Maritz, a Sto-Rox school director who has advocated for special education funding reform for more than a decade. "It's about time that we got some fairness in special education."

Currently, Pennsylvania calculates subsidies for special education by assuming that 16 percent of students in each district have disabilities. The average is about 15.5 percent, but some districts have much higher numbers.

In Sto-Rox, for example, more than a quarter of students have disabilities. With a budget of about \$24 million, the district spends about \$3.5 million on special education, only \$1 million of which comes from the state.

"That's \$2.5 million we have to take from other programs," Maritz said.

House Bill 704, sponsored by Rep. Michael Sturla, D-Lancaster, requires future appropriations for special education to be distributed according to the percentage of special needs students in each district, as well as the nature of the students' needs. In setting funding levels, state officials would have to take a district's poverty level and tax effort into account. The bill passed 173 to 24.

"If we have a higher percentage, obviously we're going to need more funding," said Shaun Sperl, coordinator of pupil services for the New Kensington-Arnold School District, where more than 21 percent of students require special education services.

"We're actually going to count students for the first time in many, many years," said Sandra Zelno, school reform associate with the Education Law Center, which has pushed for the reform.

The bill allows the General Assembly to continue to set the amount the state will spend on special education. That was about \$1 billion last year, the same as the year before.

While a hold harmless clause in the bill means that no district will receive less money than last year, any additional funding will be distributed according to the new formula.

"Any new dollars are actually going to be delivered to the districts that need it the most," Zelno said.

The bill will next move to the Senate.