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## David Mekeel: Changes to special ed-funding needed

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For two decades, public school districts have received state funding for special education the same way.

State Rep. P. Michael Sturla hopes to change that.

The Lancaster County Democrat has authored a bill that would fundamentally change special-education funding - eventually.

"The system has basically been flawed since it was changed 20 years ago," Sturla said. "It makes the incorrect assumption that 16 percent of all students across the board have special needs."

Right now, all 500 school districts are given special-education funding based on 16 percent of their student population.

But while 16 percent of students in the state are in special education, Sturla said, the distribution of those students isn't uniform from district to district.

Passed by the House about two weeks ago, House Bill 704 would instead divvy up special education funds on more of a case-by-case basis.

The main change would be that districts would get funding based on the actual number of special-education students in the district, not simply a generalized 16 percent.

"The funding would reflect the actual numbers and the needs of an individual school district," Sturla said.

The new system also would financially reward districts for successfully showing that students with moderate needs have improved enough to no longer need services.

Worried that such incentives could lead to districts playing the system, the bill calls for penalties for districts that mainstream students and can't show that the students no longer need services, Sturla said.

While special-education funding has been a long-fought battle for Sturla - he's been working on it for 15 years - he knows that his new bill isn't a quick fix. To get it through the House, he said, the bill had to stipulate that the new funding formula would apply only to new money.

"It will probably take 10 years for everything to balance out," he said.

And since special-education funding hasn't gone up in the past few years, and likely won't for the next year or two, it could be awhile until the bill's impact is felt.

And, Sturla added, the state Senate doesn't seem to be in a rush to act on the bill because no new special-education money is on the horizon. But Sturla says now is the time to act, so that when new money is available, a fair, sensible system is in place.

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