



Legislative school allies scale back hopes

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Legislative school allies scale back hopes

By Pat Forgey | JUNEAU EMPIRE

Some school advocates in the Legislature are scaling back their hopes for more funding, and are advocating smaller steps, such as keeping up with inflation or restoring slashed vocational education programs.

One big hope that remains is that state-wide pre-kindergarten programs could have every child entering school ready to learn, they said.

That might be an easier sell to legislators reluctant to provide big new dollars to schools, especially following other increases in recent years.

"If a year ago a certain amount was deemed an adequate amount for schools, that amount should be inflation-proofed," said Rep. Berta Gardner, D-Anchorage.

"I know that money isn't the only answer, but we are behind in funding," she said.

A Legislative Research analyst said over the last two years the state's per-student funding formula added \$100 a year for districts, to a total of \$5,680 per student. Inflation during the same period, however, would have meant the schools needed an additional \$52 per student just to stay even, analyst Charles Burnham told legislators.

Senate President Gary Stevens, R-Kodiak, said he was doubtful an increase in the foundation formula by which money is distributed to schools can make it through the Legislature.

Sen. Lyman Hoffman, D-Bethel, said during the last few years, education funding has increased dramatically, when extra funding for special education and to account for area cost differential and other specific programs is considered.

"I think the Legislature should be proud of what we accomplished," he said.

At the same time, he noted that followed several flat years and warned of additional flat-funding years.

Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, said he was surprised nobody had pre-filed a bill to increase education funding. He said he and his Education Committee co-chairman, Sen. Joe Thomas, D-Fairbanks, planned to do that soon. Meyer called their bill very modest, however.

"It simply keeps us up with inflation, it doesn't add anything," he said. Rep. Pete Petersen, D-Anchorage, has introduced a similar bill in the House.

Rep. Beth Kerttula, D-Juneau, said many things could be done to improve schools, but factors like high dropout rates, too many pregnancies and uncertain funding all hamper their ability to create positive change.

"I'm really worried about the state of Alaska's schools," she said.

Gardner said it may be necessary for the Legislature to add extra money for certain popular programs, such as vocational education or pre-K, and require districts to spend it there even if they have other priorities.

There may also be other, lower-cost gains that can be made, such as by raising the legal dropout age from 16 to 18.

"If kids aren't in school, schools can't do anything for them," she said.

- Contact reporter Pat Forgey at 523-2250 or patrick.forgey@juneauempire.com.

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