



STATE OF DELAWARE
STATE COUNCIL FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
Margaret M. O'Neill Bldg., Suite 1, Room 311
410 Federal Street
Dover, Delaware 19901
302-739-3621

The Honorable John Carney
Governor

John McNeal
SCPD Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 20, 2017

TO: All Members of the Delaware State Senate
and House of Representatives

FROM: Ms. Jamie Wolfe, Chairperson
State Council for Persons with Disabilities

RE: S.B. 19 (Disadvantaged Students Pilot)

The State Council for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD) has reviewed S.B. No. 19.

As background, the Legislature has been considering multiple options to improve the educational performance of students from low-income families in recent years. See, e.g., the attached News Journal articles, "Lawmakers target school spending" (February 1, 2017); and "WEIC to Carney: We need weighted school funding (March 2, 2017). Indeed, in 2015, legislation (H.B. No. 117) was introduced to create a separate funding unit for low-income students. It had a \$12.8 million fiscal note and did not receive a vote by the full House.

S.B. No. 19 adopts a more restrained approach. A pilot program would be authorized with \$1 million in funding in three consecutive years (\$3 million aggregate). The pilot would be administered by the Department of Education. Public schools could apply for funds up to \$200,000 apiece over 3 consecutive years (line 41). Thus, if the Department awarded the maximum amount to applicant schools, a total of 5 schools could participate. The Department is instructed to apportion grants equitably among the counties (lines 46-47). Schools approved for funding in year 1 could expect to be level funded during years 2 and 3 (lines 48-49).

Participating schools would randomly select students who meet certain standards, i.e., low-income students not achieving at grade level and not in special education (lines 25-32). Low income students with disabilities with §504 plans would ostensibly qualify as pilot candidates. The funds would be used to achieve the following: 1) a class size of 10 students to 1 teacher

(lines 36-37 and 51); 2) participating teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience with satisfactory performance evaluations (lines 33-34); and 3) 1:1 reading instruction (lines 38-39).

The legislation “encourages” the University of Delaware, Delaware State University, and Delaware Technical and Community College to collect and analyze data to assess the viability of the program.

It is difficult to predict the results of the initiative. The underlying hypothesis is that the education of pilot participants will be significantly improved based on the following: 1) lowering class size from 16.1 (the current K-3 unit count) to 10; 2) providing an experienced teacher versus a mix of inexperienced and experienced teachers; and 3) providing 1:1 specialized reading instruction the equivalent of 1 day/month. Skeptics may posit that these levels of support will be insufficient to significantly affect performance. The pilot does not include individualized or small group tutoring. Grouping low achieving students together could also have both positive and negative results. On the one hand, it facilitates teaching if students are roughly at the same instructional level. On the other hand, students might arguably benefit from the presence of some higher achieving students as models or peer tutors.

Given budgetary constraints, the pilot may offer a useful assessment of the viability of the identified supports in lieu of “rolling out” a more sweeping initiative. However, the sponsors could consider “piloting” different options. For example, it would be useful to assess the effects of tutoring as a supplement to the above supports.

SCPD is endorsing the proposed legislation subject to recommending consideration of some variations in forms of support listed above.

Thank you for your consideration and please contact SCPD if you have any questions regarding our observations on the proposed legislation.

cc: Mr. Brian Hartman, Esq.
Governor’s Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens
Developmental Disabilities Council

SB 19 disadvantaged students pilot 3-20-17



PHOTOS BY JASON MINTO/THE NEWS JOURNAL

Rep. Melanie George Smith, D-Bear, is the chair of the Joint Finance Committee. Sen. Harris McDowell, D-Wilmington North, wants a committee to investigate how the state can save money by passing along public services to county governments.

2-1-17
AJ

Lawmakers target school spending

Goal: Make sure funds being distributed properly



DELAWARE LEGISLATIVE
MATTHEW ALBRIGHT

Public education bureaucracy, including the number of school districts, appears to be one legislator's prime target for budget cuts this year.

"Given the situation we are in, we need to make sure that every possible dollar is going directly into the classroom," said Rep. Melanie George Smith,

chair of the Joint Finance Committee, which writes the state's budget.

At more than a billion dollars, public education is the biggest part of state spending, and it is also one of the fastest-growing parts of the state budget. That means it is near the top of the list for a General Assembly that needs to fill a \$350 million budget hole.

On her third day on the job, Secretary of Education Susan Bunting and her staff was bombarded with questions Wednesday from JFC. They scrutinized dozens of state programs and jobs at the state level, asking how they were directly affecting children and whether that money could be better spent.

JFC won't actually make budget decisions until later in the legislative session, but the hearings give a sense of the sort of ideas they are considering.

One major issue legislators raised was whether Delaware could save money by shrinking the number of school districts. There are currently 16 regular school districts and three county-wide vo-tech districts and many critics have argued that means too much money is going to district administration.

Bunting and her team said previous studies have suggested consolidation would not actually result in major savings. They also said there can be an advantage to small districts.

"The question you have to ask is, what is the ideal size for a district, so that a district knows its kids and doesn't just become another big bureaucracy," said Appoquinimink School District Superintendent Matt Burrows, who is currently head of the superintendents' association.

But several lawmakers were clearly unconvinced. "When we have a difference in the size of our districts that we have, either the bigger ones are too big or the smaller ones are too small," said committee co-chair Sen. Harris McDowell, D-Wilmington North.

Echoed Rep. Mike Ramone, R-Pike Creek: "I think there is an opportunity for us to create an environment where there is more money going into the classroom."

The school leaders also pointed out that consolidating districts would cause tax issues, since each district has its own property tax rate. If they were consolidated, either taxes would go up on some residents or rates would be lowered and districts would get less money.

The committee asked department officials to provide a study on how property taxes would be affected if

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the state went to three county-wide school districts. "That's going to inform us whether that is politically feasible or not," George Smith said.

Even if the state doesn't redistrict, several legislators called for districts to share more services. Sen. Dave Sokola, D-Newark, and the Senate Education Committee chair, suggested running school buses across districts, which could mean fewer routes and lower costs.

Another item the committee scrutinized was the state's \$91 million equalization formula — a labyrinthine system designed to equalize funding between districts with high property values and districts with low property values. They pointed out that neither the formula itself nor property tax reassessments have been updated in years, both of which mean equalization is not working as intended.

George Smith and McDowell also raised the possibility of using some equalization money to pay for proposals like weighted student funding for students in poverty. Groups like the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission have found widespread support for that move, but the state has not had money to pay for it.

David Blowman, associate secretary of finance and operations, said districts use almost all their equalization money to pay teachers salaries, so reducing the funding could cause serious heartburn.

The legislators peppered the officials with questions about roles the department plays that could be redundant or unnecessary.

The questions came in fast: does the department need this many staffers working on curriculum when districts have their own staff for that purpose? Are there jobs in other agencies doing the same thing the department is? Why do we need these programs when there are great non-profits providing the same service? Why are you hiring so many contractors instead of doing work in-house?

Bunting said she and the department realize some big changes could be in their future.

"I know with the budget crunch, we have to look at all situations," she said. "We are committed to working with you on ensuring the maximum possible resources are reaching our classrooms."

WELC to Carney: We need weighted school funding

Chairman cites gap in financial assistance for youths with special needs

JESSICA BIES THE NEWS JOURNAL

One day after Gov. John Carney said a weighted funding model proposed by the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission would "handcuff the state" financially, the commission released a statement encouraging him to reconsider allocating money for at-risk students.

Carney on Tuesday told the commission that with a projected \$350 million budget deficit, putting aside money for low-income students and English language learners was neither economical nor politically feasible. He spoke instead of "opportunity grants" for schools and restructuring Title I funding to better help students with special education needs, promising he and his staff would come up with a plan that would help improve educational outcomes in Delaware.

Tony Allen, chairman of the commission, said in a statement Wednesday that the group disagreed with that approach.

"The commission has been uniform in our view that federal Title I funding is not a substitute for state funding," he said. "The gaps in equitable funding in the state of Delaware could not be clearer. While Title I funding is meant to help support students with the greatest need in all states, 46 other states have decided that the increase in English language learners (ELL) in their state require additional state resources to support these students."

Allen goes on to say that ELL students represent the fastest growing population of students in the state. In 36 other states, including every state in the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic except



DOUG CURRAN/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL
Tony Allen, chair of Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, says his group disagrees with Gov. John Carney's approach to educational funding.

Delaware, additional allocations have been made for schools with high concentrations of low-income students, Allen said.

"It's worth noting that 50 percent of Delaware public school students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, a long-held low-income standard for children and their families," Allen added.

"Last, there remains a funding gap for kids deemed to have special needs from kindergarten through third grade, which means while they may in fact receive such supports in preschool, there is no support for their effective functioning

until they reach the fourth grade."

On Tuesday, Carney told the commission that he was late to its meeting because he was in a budget hearing involving special education funding. He said the state was having a hard time finding money for a bill that would extend basic special education to some of the state's youngest students.

The commission was strong in its feelings that its bill pass with complete funding. Yvonne Johnson, a parent and education advocate from Red Clay Consolidated School District, said the Delaware PTA would fight hard to see it suc-

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TONY ALLEN, WILMINGTON EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

ceed, and that she would not stop hounding Carney and state legislators over it.

"Delaware PTA will be advocating our butts off for that bill, and if you know me, you know that I'm not somebody who will back off," she told Carney.

Allen said something to the same effect, writing in his statement that, "if it were true that we need not make any changes to the current system because of the performance of disadvantaged students up and down the state, then the commission would relent, disband and go on its way. As we all know, the reverse is true."

He said the commission looks forward to Carney introducing his own plan for education, which the governor said would likely differ from what the group has proposed. As of now, there is no timeline for when that plan may be released.

"We are anxiously awaiting its arrival and hope that it reflects his stated intention to make education generally and in the city of Wilmington in particular one of his top priorities," Allen said.

Contact Jessica Bies at (302) 324-2881 or jbies@delawareonline.com.