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**Capitol View**

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**Say a Prayer, Pillen Wants Lawmakers to Tackle School Finance…Again**

There’s an acronym that has been stirring things up in government for the last 30-plus years. It’s called TEEOSA and the mere mention of its name sends senators to consult with staff, lobbyists to check their wallets and school administrators to check with their budget gurus.

Since it was passed in 1990, the Tax Equity and Educational Opportunities Support Act has been revamped, revised, retooled, debated and forgotten. Gov.-elect Jim Pillen calls it “our antiquated school aid formula” and has tabbed a new committee that will study how to update and reform it.

Not a novel idea, but hey, he’s the new guy so let him take a run at it.

Pillen’s School Finance Reform Committee includes state senators, school administrators, organizations representing school board members; several farm advocacies and the Americans for Prosperity --Nebraska. Read that, the billionaire Koch Brothers. But we’ll get back to that in a minute.

In the first of what promises to be four years of pontification, the Governor-elect said he’ll “be collaborating with these experienced educators, policymakers and stakeholders to come up with recommendations on how we are going to reform TEEOSA so that we can come together and create a system that invests in every Nebraska student."

Collaborating sounds good, at least until the new guy figures out that with the Koch Brothers money available it will make sense to browbeat and cudgel state senators just as his predecessor did. Buy your way to a school aid formula that will best please your friends and influencers.

I have only known a handful of Nebraska education officials and long-deceased state Senators who understand TEEOSA well enough to explain it to a reporter … or a taxpayer. At its

**For Release Wednesday, December 21, 2022 – Page 2**

most basic, TEEOSA considers a district's needs against its resources. Schools where the needs exceed the resources that can be generated through property taxes receive additional funding from the state in the form of equalization aid.

One of the goals of the formula is to provide state support from all sources of state funding sufficient to support the statewide aggregate general fund operating expenditures for Nebraska elementary and secondary public education that cannot be met by local resources while reducing the reliance on property taxes for the support of the public school system.

Pillen’s policy director Kenny Zoeller has told the media that fewer than 90 of the 244 public school districts receive equalization aid to help them meet their needs — including the state's largest school districts in Omaha, Lincoln, Millard and Grand Island. That amounts to about $3,400 per student.

The current formula has drawn criticism from Republicans and rural lawmakers. "The stakeholders on this committee will be focused on finding ways we can have an educational funding system where the state does not pick winners and losers," Zoeller said. That concept of government erroneously picking winners and losers is a key foundation of the Americans for Prosperity. I’m still trying to sort that one out, thank you.

Along with Pillen and members of his policy team, members of the committee include: State Sens. Rita Sanders of Bellevue and Tom Briese of Albion; Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Paul Gausman; Omaha Public Schools Superintendent Cheryl Logan; Seward Superintendent Josh Fields; Lakeview Superintendent Aaron Plas; Ken Bird, CEO of Avenues Scholars; the Nebraska Association of School Boards; Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association; the Nebraska Farm Bureau; Nebraska Cattlemen; and Americans for Prosperity-Nebraska.

The committee looks OK, except they haven’t gone far enough west to bring in rural school interests. The addition of the Americans for Prosperity (AFP) leaves me completely confused. There are other great Nebraska-based think tanks that have skin in this game and could be players.

**For Release Wednesday, December 21, 2022 – Page 3**

AFP, founded in 2004, is a libertarian conservative political advocacy group operating in the United States and funded by Charles Koch and formerly his brother, the late David Koch. As the Koch brothers' primary political advocacy group, it is one of the most influential American conservative organizations.

From words on its own website and analysis of national political observers, the AFB has helped create a broad network of nonprofit groups that control hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into politics. Through their deep pockets, they are reshaping politics with an uncompromising agenda of reducing regulation, advancing libertarian ideas, promoting free-market Republican candidates and ousting Democrats.

I’ll be the first to agree that we need to work on the school finance formula. Heck, we still need a major do-over of the state’s tax system. But we also need prison reform and a host of other issues that can only improve with honest statewide debate and hard work by the elected Senators.

Bringing in the outside influence – and the deep pockets – of Americans for Prosperity simply muddies the water. Stop It!

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.