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**Capitol View**

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**School Financing: Did Somebody Really Push the Easy Button?**

It seems way too easy a solution to a problem that has plagued the Legislature for years, school funding. But lawmakers have advanced Governor Jim Pillen’s proposal for the state to pay public school districts $1,500 in foundation aid per student beginning with school fiscal year 2023-24.

The measure (LB583) would also increase state aid to school districts to help cover their special education expenses. It’s all part of a larger package that includes income tax cuts, property tax relief and a cap on school revenue growth.

Catch this; it’s the largest increase in state aid to public schools in Nebraska’s history at approximately $300 million per year. It sailed through to second-round consideration in a very distracted legislative session highlighted by the relentless filibustering of two Omaha senators who are hell-bent on a single issue, allowing youth who say they want to be a gender other than what they were born to make life-changing medical decisions before they turn 19.

In that atmosphere, it might be easy to slip otherwise bad legislation through an 8-hour debate in which anything but the topic of the bill under consideration is being discussed.

What could possibly go wrong? Oh, the money could run out as conservative fiscal analysts have been warning. That would result in program and funding cuts in other areas. But hey, it’s historic, right?

Bellevue Senator Rita Sanders introduced the bill at the request of Pillen. Yes, it’s a party thing. But that seems to be what the Legislature has become this year with 32 Republicans and 17 Democrats identifying in the officially non-partisan body.

To say that the 32 have attempted to bully the 17 would be an understatement. After all, Nebraska is a Red State, and the Administration is all Republican. So, it’s their world and

**For Release Wednesday, May 3, 2023 – Page 2**

we’re just living in it. Look at how well that has worked out. Gone are the basics of compromise, civility, congeniality and negotiation.

They’ve been replaced by backbiting and name-calling and tears and shouting and threats. Gone and diminishing every day is the respect for the institution, as the participants are seen by those on the outside as a bunch of entitled brats. For every Republican who thought they were going to get their way and every Democrat who thought they were going to change things, STOP. It isn’t working.

And after we wade through all of this comes an Education Committee amendment, adopted 41-3, to replace the bill with a modified version of the original proposal. As is the fashion this year, several other related bills have been blended in, apparently without much discussion.

As amended, 23 percent of foundation aid would be paid from a new Education Future Fund. For school fiscal years 2023-24 and 2024-25, a district’s foundation aid would be included as a formula resource, meaning its state equalization aid would be reduced by an equal amount. Beginning with the school fiscal year 2025-26, only 60 percent would be included.

Throw in some other numbers and percentages and a bunch of buzz words about equalization and property taxes and special education and you’ve got a jargon-filled proposal that most of us don’t care to read about and probably won’t be discussing anytime soon.

Bottom line, Sanders says that’s intended to help large school districts, which lose funding somehow in this scheme without the amendment.

Ah, there it is. Large districts vs. small districts, the very thing that has made school finance messy and difficult in the past. That which would pack the halls with people and make committee hearings long and contentious seems to have been resolved and put in an amendment adopted by lawmakers who seem more concerned about having enough votes to end a filibuster than about whose ox is getting gored.

**For Release Wednesday, May 3, 2023 – Page 3**

Sen. Danielle Conrad of Lincoln, a veteran of eight previous years of similar discussion about school finance, says the state can use its strong fiscal position this year to answer the “constant refrain” of school districts about the increasing cost of serving students with special needs.

“It is right and it is appropriate to utilize that historic funding advantage that we have available to … infuse more resources into education,” she said.

Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne opposes the bill, saying lawmakers should direct more funding to both urban and rural school districts that have a high percentage of students in poverty.

Education Committee Chairman Sen. Dave Murman of Glenvil agrees that the state school funding formula does not adequately compensate high-poverty schools but is confident the new plan would direct per-student funding to each district for the first time in decades.

It all sounds good but let me leave you with this. Once the schools are satisfied with the money they are getting, what happens when the pandemic-infused glut of funds runs out? What gets cut to provide the money for this program?

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