

Column from Sen. Matt Bartle for
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FOUNDATION FORMULA PROPOSAL COMES UP SHORT

Recently, the first concrete proposal to fix the education foundation formula was unveiled. Although the proposal offers us a useful starting point, it still needs lots of work before it adequately addresses the funding inequalities our school districts face.

At first glance, the latest proposal appears to help urban and suburban school districts. Over the next four or five years, the state would increase overall funding to schools by \$547 million, and set a minimum payment to all school districts of \$6,117 for each pupil. From this base, schools that have higher numbers of students who qualify for free lunches, are in special education and “English as a Second Language” classes, would receive more funding from the state.

The proposal also requires districts that want additional funding to raise their property tax levy to a minimum of \$3.35 per \$100 of assessed valuation. This would provide an important incentive to rural districts to better support their own local schools. Currently, many of these rural districts keep property taxes at the bare minimum of \$2.75.

In spite of some positive aspects, under careful scrutiny, this proposal fails to adequately solve the problems of the current education funding formula. For example, under this proposal, school districts could receive a maximum of only a 10 percent increase in funding for cost-of-living differences between districts. This cap ignores the significantly higher costs urban and suburban districts face in hiring teachers. Past estimates projected that a 25 percent (not merely a 10 percent) increase in state funding was needed in expensive areas like ours to appropriately shoulder the costs of teachers in these districts.

Another problem is that the new proposal’s formula will ultimately shift funding away from high levy districts like those in Eastern Jackson County. Although each district will receive an initial increase, they will likely see their funding levels stay the same in the years ahead. The state must avoid punishing districts like ours that have local communities willing to significantly invest in their schools through higher than average levies.

Although this proposal has given us a starting point to discuss revisions to our aging education funding formula, it falls short in properly distributing the funds to help our schools. In reality, our school districts would be better off under the current formula, which everyone agrees is flawed, than under the new formula as currently proposed. As the legislature continues to debate this issue, I will work to amend this proposal to ensure our school districts receive their fair share of state funding

If you have comments or questions about this week’s column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us or by phone at (888) 711-9278.