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House K-12 Education Budget Committee  
School Finance Bills  
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am going to give you a real break this week. Rather than prepare testimony on the details of each of the school finance bills, I plan to just speak today and let my remarks apply to every bill you hear.

To that end, I wish to share with you what we believe should be part of the formula you ultimately pass.

We, like many in the education community, do not believe that there was anything wrong with the formula prior to the enactment of the block grants except that it was underfunded. This was confirmed by the Supreme Court in releasing the state from the Montoy decision after the legislature responded by enacting a series of phased-in funding increases back in 2006.

Unfortunately, the economic collapse and Great Recession forced the legislature to reverse those funding increases and we find once again that the system is awaiting an adequacy ruling from the Supreme Court.

So what do we believe you should include in your new formula?

First, we believe you should not change the equity provisions that you enacted in response to the last Supreme Court ruling. That would include keeping a balance between local and state funding such that equalization aid can adequately offset widely varying property values. Unlimited local authority would disqualify the formula and send the state back to court. We urge you to keep this in mind moving forward.

We also believe that there should be a solid per pupil foundation on which to build the formula. There should be a base level of funding that, if all other things were equal, would allow for a suitable education for every child. In the past this was base state aid per pupil.

There is a need for weightings that address the special challenges that some children bring to the schoolhouse door. At a minimum, there need to be funding streams for at-risk students, language minority students, and special education students.

We believe that at-risk funding is best distributed on the basis of poverty. Whether you use federal census data or free lunch eligibility, it is a policy decision you would need to make. I would urge you to listen closely especially to the districts that have high levels of students in poverty before deciding which path to take. In the past we have advocated for a "poverty plus" method that would take into account funding for students from districts that have a generally high socio-economic level yet still have students with significant needs. We supported the non-proficient at-risk weighting that was in place for a few years.

The needs of language minority children - children who either speak no English or have very limited proficiency in English - are undeniable. The work of the school is to assist these children in achieving fluency in English while ensuring that they don't fall behind in their academic studies. They still need to learn mathematics, history, and science while they learn English.

The past formula did not take into account how teachers who do not hold licensure in teaching English as a second language are critical to the achievement of these students. They need to develop special skills in adapting materials and lessons to the limited English proficiency of their students. The problem with the old formula is that it funded only the amount of time each of these students spent with the licensed ESL teacher. Funding should be provided to allow for the cost of additional materials, lower class sizes, and specialized teacher training.

Any formula must take into account the critical nature of early childhood education. KNEA has long supported full funding of all-day kindergarten and support for 4-year-old at-risk programs. Early learning is key to future success. Additionally, funding for all-day kindergarten allows for better use of other at-risk funds. Districts with high populations of at-risk students, recognizing the link between early learning and school success, often fund all-day kindergarten programs with at-risk moneys.

There are also some smaller items for you to consider which we believe to be important.

We would ask you to consider reducing the distance in any transportation formula and to take into consideration safety issues as well as distance issues. Busy urban streets are simply not safe for young children to cross.

It is in the state's best interest to continue to incentivize the consolidation of small school districts where such districts are small by choice and not necessity. Incentives allow communities to make these decisions on their own and not under the threat of closure.

Support for teachers is important in the continuous improvement of schools. Professional development, new teacher induction and mentoring, and participation in the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards National Board Licensure program are all deserving of legislative support.

Finally, we support the creation of an inflation factor to guide future funding. In the past, the CPI-U has been considered in determining an appropriate increase in funding from year to year. This was a step in the right direction but because school expenditures are primarily for services, an inflation factor based on the rise in consumer goods would not appropriately describe the needs of schools. We would hope that the committee could find a more accurate measure of the increasing costs of services.

In light of these issues, it is our belief that only two of the proposals you will be examining this week are deserving of our support. HB 2270 and HB 2324 offer sound solutions to the task facing this committee and we would urge you to let those be your guide moving forward.