Formula would virtually freeze city school aid for 10 years

By RUSSELL J. MOORE

The good news: the funding formula proposed by the Rhode Island Department of Education would, if enacted, increase the city's allotment of education aid by $444,362 next year based on the current distribution of $34.9 million. The bad news: the proposed funding formula would then level fund state aid to education over the next nine years under the proposal.

That assumes, however, that enrollment and student need (students on free and reduced lunch, special need students) remain the same. Should enrollment go down, as it has in recent years and is projected to continue, the district would stand to gain less money.

If enacted, Warwick residents will be subsidizing subsequent increases to costs of education entirely over the next nine years with the regressive property tax.

The formula released by the Department of Education starts with a dollar amount of $8,295 assigned to each student. That number is based on what RIDE assumes should be reasonable costs of teachers and faculty statewide. RIDE maintains that figure is adequate to fund instruction statewide, regardless of district, under the Basic Education Program.

The formula multiplies the number of students in a district or charter school by the $8,295. It then takes the number of students on free and reduced lunch, the state's indicator of poverty, and multiplies that number by 40 percent. That number is then added to the original $8,295.

The sum is considered "the core instruction and students success total."

The formula then takes into account the percentage of students in grades K-6 from a given
district that receive a free or reduced lunch, and the district’s revenue-generating capacity. The district’s revenue-generating capacity is a number between 0 and 1 based on each district’s assessed real estate values and median income values.

Developed by the state department of education in concert with researchers at Brown University, the formula then takes both those factors and squares them, divides them by two and then takes that number’s square root.

According to a PowerPoint presentation by the Department of Education, there will be additional resources for special needs students, once a given threshold of cost is established.

The complexity of the department’s formula led Rhode Island cartoonist Charlie Hall to jokingly suggest that world renowned physicist Stephen Hawking wouldn’t be able to understand it in his most recent cartoon.

State Education Commissioner Deborah Gist, however, argued in a press release that if the formula is implemented by the state legislature, it would leave Rhode Island with “the best funding formula in the country.”

Warwick’s share of school spending would alter as conditions change. For instance, if an influx of students needing a free or reduced lunch entered the district, the system would receive more money. If the state were to increase the figured cost of the Basic Education Program, the number would also increase.

Rhode Island is the only state in the nation to lack a funding formula. That, however, doesn’t mean the state taxpayers don’t spend generously on education. The latest RIPEC (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council) report shows that Rhode Island (municipalities and state combined) spends the 10th highest amount of money, per capita, in the nation on elementary and high school education.

Mayor Scott Avedesian, when contacted recently, said he was glad that formulas were being brought forward, because it adds “predictability.” Avedesian said he prefers Cumberland Mayor Daniel McKee’s funding formula, because it completely “follows the student,” meaning it funds students in charter schools and districts equally.

School Committee Chairman Christopher Friel, when contacted yesterday, said the state needs a school funding formula, but is withholding his opinion on the current proposals until he has time to research them.

“From what I’ve heard, the state desperately needs a funding formula. That was evident during the Race To The Top application process,” said Friel, noting it is widely expected that the lack of a formula will work against districts.

The Board of Regents is expected to vote on the formula at their meeting this evening. If it gains their approval, it would need legislative approval.

Kaianna Hansen, Kristina Disanto, Calandra Sahagian, Kevin Shepherd, Stefanie Abbott, Emma Hindinger, Megan Merlino, Kasey Stumar, Jenna Cote and Brittany Langlois. The committee is overseen by Lisa Sweet.

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