

Reprinted with permission from The Omaha World-Herald.

Omaha World-Herald

School aid still a work in progress

Two Omaha leaders get a positive reception for their ideas to ease concerns about the formula that distributes dollars.

BY JEFFREY ROBB
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

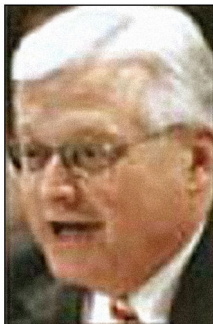
A powerful pair of civic leaders who influenced the creation of the learning community law now are turning their attention to the divisive subject of the state school finance system.



Gottschalk

John Gottschalk, chairman of the Omaha World-Herald Co., and Kermit Brashear, former speaker of the Legislature, are floating a plan to state and school officials that aims to help relieve school finance concerns in the Omaha area.

The proposal is connected to the learning community and the concerns that several school districts have raised about the new law. The plan, however, would do little to change the learning community, focusing more on a state school aid system that is the subject of a lawsuit brought by the Omaha Public Schools and fellow plaintiffs.



Brashear

In a letter to a committee he heads, Gottschalk wrote that the system is “chaotic” and “unprincipled, unfocused and unaccountable.”

Brashear, who is the lobbyist for that committee, has been in close contact with State Sen. Ron Raikes of Lincoln, the influential chairman of the Education Committee and a guardian of the current state aid system.

Raikes said Brashear has raised important concerns, although the two differ on some specific proposals.

“A lot of what he’s done, I think, is on target,” Raikes said.

OPS Superintendent John Mackiel called the proposal “very, very healthy” and said the plan, along with other state aid concepts being floated, holds “extreme potential for good policy on a statewide basis.”

“It’s moving in the right direction,” Mackiel said.

When asked what the proposal could mean for the district’s lawsuit against the state, Mackiel said that would depend on what ultimately is passed in the Legislature.

Although part of the proposal is written in bill form, Gottschalk said in his letter that he does not intend to seek a legislative sponsor. He wrote that he has shared the material with Gov. Dave Heineman and hopes it “will become something the Legislature will move on early in the session.” The Legislature opens its new session on Wednesday.

Heineman, who recently called for a significant long-term overhaul of the state aid formula, declined through a spokeswoman to comment on the proposal.

Brashear, who calls his role one of “helpful, supportive preparation,” said he hopes the proposal will prompt conversations about detailed solutions.

The proposal would maintain the general framework of the complex school finance formula. The system provides state funding in relation to school districts’ special characteristics and their ability to generate property taxes.

Within that framework, the proposal offers a number of changes.

Several concepts are aimed at addressing the OPS allegations that the system discriminates against its poor and minority students.

The proposal also aims to assist several districts that stand to lose revenue under the learning community’s new finance structure. It recommends, for instance, that fast-growing school districts receive additional state aid.

Under the learning community’s new finance system, fast-growing districts such as Elkhorn, Gretna and Bennington are projected to lose funding as revenue is sent to districts with more disadvantaged students.

Raikes, too, supports the concept of providing extra aid to growing districts, although he is looking at a different approach.

Raikes said some of his own legislative proposals will closely resemble ideas being suggested.

“There are some ideas in there that are very close to what I think would be a good change,” Raikes said.

But though he agreed that the state aid system needs changes, he defended the system overall. Raikes said the aid system makes sure every school district can support its needs.

“In that sense, I don’t think you can argue it’s chaotic or even unpredictable,” Raikes said.

Brashear and Gottschalk, acting through the Metro Student Achievement Steering Committee formed by Gottschalk during the last legislative session, became major players in the session’s learning community discussion.

Brashear brought forward a compromise proposal that became the learning community law, and he was involved behind the scenes in its passage.

With the law in place, Gottschalk asked Brashear to sort through new complaints about the learning community law and lingering school finance matters. The new proposal, which is labeled the student achievement committee’s legislative compilation, results from that work.

“Unless we can come to grips with the chaotic shortcomings of the present distribution formula,” Gottschalk wrote to his committee, “there is little hope (the Legislature) can or will do anything other than what has brought us to this mess.”

Last week, the Legislature’s Education Committee and the 11 metro-area superintendents received copies of the analysis and legislative proposal.

Ten of the superintendents met Friday to discuss the package. South Sarpy’s superintendent had a scheduling conflict and was unable to attend.

Westside Superintendent Ken Bird called the meeting positive. Bird said the framework proposed - and the people behind it - could make a difference.

Several superintendents, including those from Millard, Elkhorn, Ralston and Bennington, said they needed to take the information back to their school boards for direction.

The proposal does not address the level of school funding or detail the impact of individual changes to the state aid formula.

But finances were an immediate concern to the superintendents.

At Friday’s meeting, school officials matched the proposal against a list of guiding principles they are asking lawmakers to consider in the upcoming discussions.

Those principles include boosting state support for schools and making sure school districts aren’t financially penalized for participating in a learning community.