

Senate budget includes \$5M for private schools

Jonathan Oosting, Detroit News Lansing Bureau 5:51 p.m. EDT April 14, 2016



(Photo: Dale G. Young / The Detroit News file photo)

Lansing — For the second year in a row, Michigan legislators are considering a controversial budget proposal that would send \$5 million in public funds to private schools to cover costs associated with state mandates.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Dave Hildenbrand, R-Lowell, on Thursday inserted the extra funding into a K-12 budget bill that won committee approval. A separate House budget bill advanced Wednesday includes a [smaller \\$1 million appropriation](#) ([/story/opinion/columnists/ingrid-jacques/2016/04/01/state-aid-private-schools/82501082/](#)) for private schools.

The funding would help private schools pay for things such as employee background checks, fire and tornado drills, various reports and immunization verification, Hildenbrand said.

“We’re requiring them as a government to do these things and not paying the costs,” he said.

Democrats appeared to be taken off guard by Hildenbrand’s proposed amendment. All minority party members either voted against the amendment or chose to pass on the vote.

“I’d understand if we were mandating them to provide some major education service, but this is basic stuff, stuff they should be doing anyway,” said Sen. Coleman Young II, D-Detroit.

A House appropriations subcommittee approved a similar budget line item last year, setting aside \$5 million for private schools to cover the cost of state mandates. The provision ultimately was stripped amid complaints from Democrats, who questioned whether the proposed appropriation was constitutionally permissible.

The Michigan Constitution general prohibits public funding for private schools, but supporters argue that reimbursing those schools for state mandates is allowed.

Private schools educate roughly 100,000 students in the state. The Michigan Catholic Conference, which supports the budget funding, estimates that complying with state mandates costs private schools \$10 million a year, about twice the amount included in the Senate bill.

Catholic Conference spokesman David Maluchnik said the funding will help ensure “the health and well-being of all of Michigan’s students, regardless if they attend a public or nonpublic school.”

“The funding has nothing to do with education or instruction, nor does it advance a religious curriculum. It simply addresses the necessity for the health and safety of all students to be recognized by the state,” he continued.

Some state funds already support private schools that share services or teachers with public schools. Private schools have recently won state grants to improve building security and safety.

The Senate Appropriations Committee on Thursday also added \$3.5 million to its Department of Education budget for statewide lead water testing in schools. Gov. Rick Snyder had proposed the water test funding for both public and private schools, but details on the Senate provision were not immediately available.

Split on testing, higher ed

The House and Senate education budget bills for fiscal year 2017 differ sharply on university funding and the future of standardized testing in K-12 schools.

The House budget would eliminate \$22 million in funding for the M-STEP test, first given to Michigan students last school year. The Senate budget does not strip the funding.

The first year of the M-STEP assessment was [marred by a long lag in results reporting](#) ([/story/news/politics/2016/01/21/unacceptable-step-delays-prompt-contract-changes/79122146/](#)), which delayed feedback for both schools and parents. K-12 subcommittee chairman Tim Kelly, R-Saginaw Township, wants to replace the M-STEP with a “computer adaptive test,” which he has said could be cheaper and more responsive.

Democrats, including Rep. Pam Faris of Clio, questioned whether the state could find a new test vendor in time for next school year and suggested the plan may be rushed.

House Speaker Kevin Cotter, R-Mount Pleasant, said Thursday he has not made any final decisions about M-STEP funding. He pointed out that eliminating the test means schools would lose another year of comparison data to track student growth.

"I certainly recognize some of the flaws of the M-STEP, at least the first time through, but at the same time I want to balance that against continued change when it comes to how we test students," Cotter said.

The House budget would bump K-12 and community college funding beyond increases recommended by Gov. Rick Snyder, but it includes smaller increase for higher education.

Snyder had proposed [restoring university funding \(/story/news/politics/2016/02/09/michigan-higher-education-funding-snyder/80063654/\)](/story/news/politics/2016/02/09/michigan-higher-education-funding-snyder/80063654/) to levels last seen in 2011, when a budget crunch led to significant reductions. The House proposal would increase total higher education funding 3.4 percent but university operations would come in \$13.5 million below the governor's recommendation.

The governor's budget anticipated elimination of an unintended tax credit the Legislature gave auto insurers in 2012, said House Appropriations Chairman Al Pscholka. He [wants to cut that tax credit \(/story/news/politics/2016/04/04/michigan-auto-insurance-assigned-claims-tax-credit-lucrative-handout-ever/82639958/\)](/story/news/politics/2016/04/04/michigan-auto-insurance-assigned-claims-tax-credit-lucrative-handout-ever/82639958/), but because that has not yet happened, he said it was necessary to scale back some of Snyder's budget recommendations, including higher education funding.

"I don't have a problem with what the governor proposed, it's just we don't have that amount of general fund," said Pscholka, R-Stevensville, who made clear he is willing to revisit university funding levels if the tax credit is eliminated. "We want to have a structurally balanced budget."

The Senate budget includes the full \$59.8 million university operation funding increase proposed by the governor, but it strips part of the increase from Eastern Michigan University and Oakland University because they exceeded the state's 3.2 percent tuition restraint cap last year.

Budget bills in both chambers would raise that tuition restraint cap to 4.8 percent next fiscal year.

The House and Senate are divided on Snyder's \$5 million request for the School Reform Office to fund building-level chief executive officers in distressed schools. The Senate added that funding this week but the House removed it, inserting a \$100 placeholder instead.

State Rep. Sarah Roberts, D-St. Clair Shores, questioned the placeholder, calling the CEO model a "state takeover program" and comparing the idea to emergency managers.

"I don't understand why we wouldn't use models that have worked, that have actually turned schools around without a state takeover but based more on collaboration," she said Wednesday.

The House and Senate have now advanced separate education budget bills to the floor for consideration. Further debate is expected, with legislators likely to wrap up the full budget process by early June.

joosting@detroitnews.com

(517)371-3662

twitter.com/jonathanoosting

Read or Share this story: <http://detne.ws/1NbiYzq>

**EVERYTHING YOU NEED FOR
YOUR KITCHEN**

