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Learning community schools still divided over dollars

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Metro school districts coming together in the new learning community showed lawmakers on Monday that they remain divided over dollars.

Yet the new chairman of the Legislature's Education Committee says he remains optimistic that he can help address the districts' concerns.

"It doesn't mean everybody's going to come away happy," said State Sen. Greg Adams of York.

The committee heard testimony on two bills dealing with the learning community's shared property tax base. The Millard and Douglas County West school districts came out in favor of a bill to dump core elements of the new school funding system for Douglas and Sarpy Counties, Legislative Bill 387. They joined Papillion-La Vista, a longtime critic of the system, due to begin implementation this year.

Those districts stood against the Omaha, Bellevue and Ralston school districts, which stand to benefit from the pending changes. They oppose repealing the learning community's shared property tax base.

On another bill, South Sarpy, which is expected to take a financial hit under the pending system the Legislature created, testified in favor of extending a phase-in period for the common property tax system - moving it from three to five years.

The bill is meant to soften the blow for South Sarpy and D.C. West. South Sarpy Superintendent Chuck Chevalier called the bill a "lifeboat" for a district at risk of sinking under the pending financial changes.

Yet providing that extra funding would take money from another group of metro districts. The shared tax base will direct revenue from suburban and agricultural areas into the inner city and school districts with lower property valuations.

Bellevue and Bennington testified against the delay offered by Legislative Bill 391. The Omaha Public Schools also had expressed concerns.

Adams, who introduced LB 391, has been working with metro districts behind the scenes to revise his bill. He said recent discussions have been constructive and he's "confident it's going to continue to be constructive."

The repeal proposed by Sen. Tim Gay of Papillion is unlikely to get out of committee, given the lineup of sitting members.

Sen. Brad Ashford of Omaha challenged Millard's lobbyist on the district's opposition to the common property tax system.

Ashford said he was "flabbergasted" and that it was counterproductive to the work being started by the learning community's governing council.

"If you throw the common levy out, then let's just unwind the whole thing," he said.

Bill Mueller, Millard's lobbyist, said the district doesn't oppose the learning community but believes the authority to tax for school operations should rest with school boards, not the learning community council.

Millard stands to gain financially under the shared tax base.

The learning community council - which formed just last month - also made its presence known. It testified in opposition to Gay's bill.

Omaha Superintendent John Mackiel said the financial equity offered by the common tax levy is critical to the entire learning community. Without that system, he said, the learning community's separate effort to voluntarily integrate schools will fail.

"It simply will not occur if some school districts have and some school districts have not," he said.

Adams offered few details publicly about his latest proposal.

He said it was never the intention to push South Sarpy and D.C. West off "the edge of a cliff." At the same time, he

is calling on the two districts - with their high property valuations and high spending per student - to lower their spending.

"There are some realities that have to be dealt with here on the part of those school districts," Adams said.

Said Gretna Superintendent Kevin Riley, "We need to get the finances behind us and focus on the needs of the children."

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