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Any funding plan must be fair to all

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Tennessee's struggle to craft an equitable school funding formula spans 20 years and three lawsuits — lawsuits brought by rural school systems on the basis of the state's constitutional requirement for an "equal" education for all.

As a result of those lawsuits, Tennessee created the Basic Education Program in 1992, a plan designed to more equitably distribute state funding.

Today, we are faced with the opposite end of the pendulum swing, with first rural systems, and now urban school systems saying they are not adequately funded by the state. There will never be a "perfect" funding formula, but a largely untouched 14-year-old formula probably deserves some attention.

Part of today's problem, according to the BEP Review Committee and the Tennessee Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations, is that the current formula does not clearly model the range of available taxes cities and counties can tap to pay their share of K-12 education.

However, the front-running replacement plan actually double-counts the tax bases of cities and counties, according to the BEP Review Committee, and creates huge winners and losers in terms of funding distribution.

For instance, my home county of Sullivan's school system would gain \$2.6 million in state funding, while Bristol and Kingsport city systems would lose \$815,000 and \$3.37 million, respectively.

Competing solutions are numerous. Some want the state to take over all funding. Others are content with modifying the current 95-county based funding system, some believe a formula based on 136 individual school systems would be more equitable, and opinions vary on allowing cities and counties to dedicate local tax monies above those required by the state.

Transparency, flexibility needed

While we can argue about funding distribution, I think the bottom line is that any new formula must be fair, transparent and flexible. It must also hold school systems harmless from any loss of funding due to redistribution while at the same time helping the urban systems who have been harmed by the current formula.

Meanwhile, the House Republican Caucus is putting a major emphasis on reviewing and passing the K-12 education budget first and foremost before the rest of the state budget in an initiative we call, "Education First!" I believe this could help focus on deep seated problems that go way beyond funding alone.

The state K-12 education budget has grown 112 percent to \$2.8 billion in the 10 years from 1992 to 2002. You can tack on at least \$347 million in new dollars since 2004, and Gov. Phil Bredesen is asking for \$232.8 million in new money for 2006-07.

Yet, despite sizable funding increases and lowering class sizes, a RAND Corp. study last fall found that Tennessee continues to seriously lag peer states and the nation in progress on national assessment tests.

If our students can't compete as a state and a nation in language and math, it's all over.

We can always argue about funding distribution. However, I believe what we really must be arguing is how to get results for the dollars our citizens are putting in.

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