

Nevada panel wants money before looking at education funding plan

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – A panel of lawmakers on Tuesday began a review of the state’s 45-year-old formula for funding public education with an eye toward addressing the needs of the state’s urban districts as they work to educate special education students, English-language learners and children in poverty.

The panel is still searching for funding for a study to help in the review, however. The failure to find private funding for a study could jeopardize any meaningful review in this interim, lawmakers were told.

The panel decided to give the Clark County School District, which advocated for the review in the 2011 legislative session, until Feb. 21 to identify a minimum of \$125,000 in private funding to perform the necessary study. The panel would then meet again on Feb. 28 if the funding is secured.

The New Method for Funding Public Schools interim study was authorized by the 2011 Legislature to look at the “Nevada Plan” the current funding formula adopted in 1967.

“As we know over the past several decades since the Nevada Plan was developed and adopted, our state has grown and changed significantly,” Assemblyman Marcus Conklin, D-Las Vegas, the chairman of the panel, said. “A periodic review of the state’s funding methodology for public schools is necessary to ensure that the funding methodology accomplishes what it was originally designed to do – which was to ensure an adequate educational opportunity for all Nevada students

regardless of individual school district wealth.”

Following a review of the Nevada Plan, the panel can then determine if inadequacies or inequities exist, he said.

“Then we can develop any recommendations for improvement, if necessary, to ensure that the state’s public school funding methodology equitably considers the individual needs and characteristics of Nevada’s public school student population,” Conklin said.

Joyce Haldeman, associate superintendent of community and government relations with the Clark County School District, said there is no intention with the review to take away funding from other school districts.

Instead, the state’s largest school district would like to see additional factors given weight in the formula, including English language learners, special education students, gifted and talented and students receiving free- and reduced lunches, she said.

The study is the result of Senate Bill 11 sought by the Clark County School District to consider a weighted enrollment formula to take into account the different educational needs of children in the larger districts.

Craig Stevens, director of government relations for the Nevada State Education Association, spoke in support of the study.

“Our state is simply too diverse and the needs are too specialized to have a flat rate just for every single child,” he said. “It really not only hurts those that need the specialization but those that do not as well. We fully support making sure that funds are differentiated so that the student gets the services that they need in order to be fully successful.”

Several parents from Clark County also expressed support for

the study, saying the funding formula needs revision because it shortchanges the district.

But Assemblyman Ira Hansen, R-Sparks, a member of the panel, asked for justification for the review, noting a 2007 study by lawmakers identified no inequities in the Nevada Plan.

After spending nearly \$250,000, the conclusion was that the Nevada Plan was highly equitable, he said.

“Now what’s changed between 2007 and today?” Hansen asked.

The committee debated how overarching any funding formula review should be, given that no money was allocated for a study. The consensus was that a narrow review, focusing on several key student populations, would be the most practical approach if funding is secured.

The Clark County School District had anticipated \$125,000 in funding from a foundation to pay for a study, but the district learned the money will not be forthcoming, Haldeman told the panel. The district is looking for other funding sources, she said.

The Nevada Policy Research Institute, a conservative think tank, weighed in on the Nevada Plan in September 2011, noting that many people, including policy makers, are either confused or deliberately misleading on the issue of per pupil funding in the public schools.

The analysis suggested that when all sources of funding are included in per pupil expenditures, the dollars spent are much higher than are reported by the districts.