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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS TIMES

State offers school district a bone

BY BRETT BENNETT Northwest Arkansas Times

Posted on Wednesday, April 4, 2007

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Fayetteville would get some minimal funding assistance for school construction projects from the Arkansas Department of Education under a new act approved by the Arkansas Legislature.

The new regulation would guarantee that Fayetteville and similar districts would receive at least one-half of 1 percent of the estimated cost of construction projects. Fayetteville is among the districts that currently receive no state assistance for school construction projects.

The amount of assistance under the program varies from district to district based on the wealth index, a formula that evaluates property values compared to student enrollment. Fayetteville was eligible for the amount of assistance during the 2005-2006 school year but lost its eligibility when the wealth index was re-evaluated in 2006-2007.

Fayetteville and Bentonville had been among the districts that received no assistance. Some rural districts in sparsely populated

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areas receive more than 70 percent in state aid for their projects.

Steve Percival, Fayetteville School Board president, said while the district can use the assistance, the relatively small percentage won't become a deciding factor in whether to pursue specific projects.

The district is in the process of planning a future high school project, for example, and Percival noted that on a potential \$ 50 million high school, the district would only receive \$ 250, 000 in state aid. Most of the project would still be funded at the local level.

" Certainly we appreciate every dollar we get, but it's not going to help that much, " Percival said.

Other Legislature action related to school facilities includes Senate Bill 962, which would offer zerointerest loans to high-growth districts.

To be considered a " highgrowth" district, overall enrollment would have had to increase by at least 4 percent over two years. The loans would also be tied to the district meeting a certain property tax rate, so the loans' zero-interest rate would essentially reward districts for taxing themselves to fund facilities projects. Percival said it is too early to tell if such a program would be beneficial to Fayetteville. The district has traditionally had a growth rate of 1 to 2 percent annually.

Herbert Dorman, Farmington School Board president, whose district would have no problem earning the high-growth classification, was hopeful the bill would help his district as it tackles facilities projects. Farmington School Board members and administrators have been lobbying the state to make changes to how school facilities projects are funded. This is due in large part to projected cost overruns on a new elementary school construction project.

" I hope (our efforts) made a difference, " Dorman said. " It's a step in the right direction. "

Another education-related bill that has become an act concerns body mass index testing in school districts.

Within the past three years, the state has required schools to conduct such tests of their students to see if their body weight is in a healthy range.

The new law calls for the testing to be done for students in even-numbered grades and kindergarten. Thus, body mass index tests would only be conducted every other year. Schools will also be exempt from administering tests to teenagers in grades 11-12.

While not adding any formal requirements, the Legislature passed a

resolution recommending and endorsing school districts to provide one morning and one midafternoon recess period for kindergarten through sixth grade. The resolution was drafted by Rep. Lindsley Smith, D-Fayetteville. It was, in part, due to efforts by a Fayetteville couple, Dan and Julia Kennefick, to raise awareness about limited recess time in schools.

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