Pols eye fix for ‘broken’ school budget formula

Meghan Ottolini Tuesday, April 11, 2017

OVERHAUL: State Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz has filed legislation to update the Bay State's school funding formula.

Credit: Angela Rowlings

Beacon Hill legislators — including a leading Republican — and local education groups are

backing state Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz's bill to update Massachusetts’ 24-year-old school funding formula.

The Foundation Budget, established by the 1993 Education Reform Act, determines how much funding local school systems receive from the state on a per-pupil basis.

Chang-Diaz (D-Boston) presented the bill at a press conference yesterday, calling the current Foundation Budget formula “broken” and “out of date.”

“We have been living in this state of slow erosion — death by a thousand paper cuts,” she said.

According to data analyzed by the 2015 Foundation Budget Review Commission, through the current formula the state underestimates the costs of public K-12 education by up to $2 billion a year.

“Health care costs have grown higher than we had anticipated. Special education costs, the same thing,” said state Sen. Marc Pacheco (D-Taunton), who voted on the original Foundation Budget 24 years ago and now supports Chang-Diaz’s overhaul.

The revamped Foundation Budget would account for those rising costs, as well as the costs of bringing students learning English as a second language and low-income students up to proficiency levels.

The bill would also create a “Data Advisory Task Force” to improve how school-level data can better inform future decisions around school policy.

Chang-Diaz has garnered support from 80 state legislators, including state Rep. Geoff Diehl (R-Whitman), who may be eyeing a 2018 run against U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren. A spokesperson from Diehl’s office said increasing education funding is a critical issue for the father of two young daughters.

House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo (D-Winthrop) has not signed on as a sponsor of the bill, but said in a statement: “I am pleased that the House’s FY18 budget begins to implement the most significant recommendation of the Foundation Budget Review Commission by increasing the health care benefit.”

Kalise Osula, a 2015 graduate of the Boston Community Leadership Academy and member of the nonprofit Youth on Board, said funding cuts were painfully obvious to her as a student: “In both my middle school and high school there were no librarians, there was no gym. More and more I saw teachers taking on responsibilities outside their subjects.”

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