

Block-grant bill a model of poor lawmaking

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At least it wasn't passed in the middle of the night.

Otherwise, the block-grant education bill now bound for Gov. Sam Brownback's desk has been a model of poor lawmaking:

Crafted out of sight. Unveiled to allow Kansas' 286 school districts just part of one workday and a weekend to try to understand its potential impact before hearings began.

Handled by the money committees rather than the education panels in each chamber. Hurriedly approved by the House Appropriations Committee, which valued the endorsements of a very few anti-tax special-interest groups over the outcry of hundreds of people who actually spend time in Kansas schools.

Engineered so that it could only be amended and fully debated in one chamber and have an up-or-down vote in the other. Altered to help two southeast Kansas districts, ignoring that Wichita and many other districts will see major funding reductions under the bill.

Forced through the House, barely eight days after the bill's introduction, via an extraordinary final-action vote lasting two hours and involving deploying the state plane in an attempt to fetch a "yes" voter. Immediately read into the Senate record, preventing any remorseful representatives from offering a motion Monday to reconsider the House vote.

And finally eased (<http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article14669279.html>) through the Senate, where it could only be the subject of questions rather than amendments – and where opponents were denounced as liars.

"Trickery, trickery, trickery," Rep. Kathy Wolfe Moore, D-Kansas City, called (<http://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article13202321.html>) it last week.

Plus, it's unfunded, meaning for all the proponents' talk of "certainty," the plan's promises from now through June 2017 are subject to change if the state's revenue picture remains disastrous. Though there are benefits for some districts, including flexibility in how money is spent, the bill newly lets the state off the hook for districts' changing funding needs, such as for enrollment, demographics or transportation.

Why so much haste, and such disdain for the feedback from school boards, administrators, teachers and parents? What could justify the rush by the governor and lawmakers to throw out the intricate school-finance formula that has tried to meet the needs of K-12 public schoolchildren for 23 years by accounting for the socioeconomic and property-value disparities across the state?

The block-grant bill certainly appears intended to cut off the Kansas courts at the pass, and to make it hard for judges to hold the state accountable for insufficiently funding public schools under a newly defunct formula. Whether that gambit will work is in doubt, though, as the three-judge panel in Shawnee County District Court that has twice said state support for schools is unconstitutionally low said last week it could act to "preserve the status quo."

The whole hurried process inspires no confidence in state leaders' ability or intention to write a fair, adequate school-finance formula over the next two years. Unfortunately, one of the certainties of the block-grant bill is that Brownback will sign it.

For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman