

# Lawmakers Urged To Boost School Funding

BY CHET BROKAW  
 Associated Press

PIERRE — Officials representing South Dakota school districts urged a legislative panel Wednesday to consider recommending a boost in state financial aid to schools, not just changes in the way money is divided among school districts.

"Education is in a crisis, and we truly need to do something about it — not soon, but now," Rob Monson, executive director of the South Dakota Association of School Administrators, told the lawmakers.

Financial problems are causing school districts to cut some programs and they are losing teachers to districts in other states that pay higher salaries, Monson told the Legislature's Education Funding Formula Study Committee.

Dick Schaffan, superintendent of the McIntosh School District, said he agrees that school districts are in financial trouble.

"I hope you can find something to help us out," Schaffan said.

The committee was appointed to study the state's system for funding public school districts. It is specifically charged with looking at how the funding formula affects high school graduation rates, how technology affects education and why many school districts have decided to increase local

property taxes above standard state limits.

Some committee members questioned whether they are allowed to look at the overall funding levels for schools, but others said the panel's specific tasks require such consideration.

The committee met for the first time Wednesday, spending most of the day learning about how state, federal and local funding is used in schools and how the formula distributes money among South Dakota's 151 public school districts.

School officials say they have not recovered from cuts Gov. Dennis Daugaard and the Legislature made two years ago to help balance the state budget.

South Dakota law requires that state aid to schools increase each year by the level of inflation, up to a maximum of 3 percent a year. The Legislature in some years has given schools extra money that is not built into the base used to calculate future increases, but it also gave no increase in 2010 and cut aid in 2011 when the sluggish economy limited state tax collections.

The funding formula requires that each school district's general fund budget spend the same amount per student from a combination of local property taxes and state aid, a total of \$4,626 next year. After a school district collects property taxes using a standard statewide levy, it receives enough state

aid to bring total spending for general operations up to the required level per student. Small schools get extra state aid.

For property taxes payable this year, 66 districts decided to set property taxes higher than the standard statewide levy.

Joy Smolnisky of the South Dakota Budget and Policy Project, a nonprofit organization that studies budget issues, said South Dakota school districts get about the same amount of funding from property taxes as those in surrounding states. But state funding per student in South Dakota is significantly lower than in surrounding states, she said. The state's share of school funding in South Dakota was about \$3,000 per student in 2011, about half the average state spending in surrounding states, Smolnisky said.

Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton, said all organizations have to adjust how they operate as society changes. She asked what schools have done to use new technology.

Monson said schools now not only have to teach traditional subjects, but also are required to deal with health education, adopt new technology and switch to a new curriculum in some courses. Teachers are asked to take on those additional responsibilities without any increase in pay, he said.

The committee plans to meet again July 29-30.

## Neb. To Commence Study Of School Funding

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A legislative committee has begun to look at ways to improve Nebraska's school funding formula.

Members of the Education Committee met on Wednesday to begin their work on the interim study, which could lead to changes in the way state aid to schools is distributed.

The formula seeks to fill the gap between school district needs and what each can generate locally through property taxes. State funding for schools has led to conflicts in recent years between many smaller and larger school districts.

Sen. Kate Sullivan of Cedar Rapids, the committee chairwoman, has said the study will explore ways to make funding more stable and predictable for school districts. Lawmakers also plan to work in tandem with members of a committee that is studying Nebraska's tax system.

## Bullet Donations Pour Into Nebraska Scouts

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Donations of bullets have poured into a southeast Nebraska Boy Scout group after it raised concerns that an ammunition shortage would force campers to learn to shoot using air guns rather than rifles.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported Wednesday that leaders of the Scout's Cornhusker Council sought donations of .22-caliber bullets after retailers weren't able to fill their order due to a national ammunition shortage.

Cornhusker Council district director Jerad Reimers said the group went public with its problem, hoping for donations of 24,000 rounds in time for training of scouts at Camp Cornhusker.

Instead, people donated more than 65,000 bullets from as far away as Florida. Reimers says an Iowa man gave more than 10,000 rounds.

Reimers said the bullets will help ensure scouts learn how to handle a gun properly, something he calls "an absolute necessity."

Camp program director William Cover agreed. "We in America have a culture that does involve firearms. We want to make sure our young people are instructed in their proper and safe usage," Cover said.

Before the bullet donations began arriving, camp organizers worried that scouts would need to practice with BB guns.

Reimers said that would have been unfortunate because scouts wouldn't have treated the training the same way without real ammunition.

## Some Lincoln Homeowners Have Questions About Plant

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — People who live near a lead recycling plant site in Lincoln have raised questions and suspicions about a recently released contamination report.

More than four dozen people met Tuesday with officials from state and local health and environmental agencies to discuss higher-than-normal lead levels found in the yards of some homes in the North Bottoms neighborhood.

The lead is believed to have come from air emissions by the old Northwestern Metal Co. plant that once stood near the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Memorial Stadium.

Some of those who attended asked about any health danger posed to their children.

Others asked whether the contamination tests were a ploy to reduce the value of their homes so real estate developers or the university could buy their homes cheap.

A Kansas developer has proposed building a nearby apartment complex aimed at university students. The complex eventually could have nearly 950 units on 5.3 acres owned and occupied by Capital Steel. The steel plant is situated in the neighborhood, too, just a few blocks north of the lead plant that had sat at Ninth and T streets.

The homeowners' suspicions were unnecessary, said staffers from the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality. The potential health risk to children was the impetus for the soil testing, said Mike Felix, remediation supervisor for the department, and had nothing to do with any redevelopment.

Recent state testing showed lead in the soil under the parking lot next to the Nebraska Champions Club at Memorial Stadium and in the yards at nine homes in the North Bottoms neighborhood to the northwest.

The lead content was above 400 parts per million, which the Environmental Protection Agency says is a hazardous level for children's play areas and the level at which more testing is necessary.

Experts say children are most susceptible to harm from lead. Medical problems can include anemia, damage to the brain and nervous system, to the liver and kidney and to a child's overall development.

The state has asked the EPA to do more testing to determine whether remediation is necessary. In most cases that means removing old topsoil and replacing it.

In response to other questions, officials said the EPA will test soil only on the properties of people who agree and that any replacement of soil would be voluntary and likely paid for by the EPA.

The new tests are expected to take several months.

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