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Where will those education dollars go?

By Monica Wright

Governor Tim Pawlenty signed a new education bill that will fund early childhood programs and K__-12 schools throughout the state for the next two years. Here's a breakdown of what some of the \$13.8 billion will (and at times won't) buy Minnesota's children:

No: To all-day kindergarten. While the bill includes \$33 million to expand the program, it falls far short of the \$320 million necessary to spread all-day kindergarten to every district in the state. While Democratic leaders had discussed statewide all-day K when they took over both houses, they did not put this funding in the bill.

No: To changes to the state's sexual health education statute. The updated provision, known as Responsible Family Life and Sexuality Education, would have allowed high schools to teach about contraception options, pregnancy, and relationship skills but was removed from the bill at the last minute. "Right now, schools must teach about STIs [sexually transmitted illnesses] and HIV and that's all the statute has to say about sex ed," says Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention, and Parenting Executive Director Brigid Riley. "What we proposed was trying to break that apart and get some clarity about what kinds of info should be taught that would be age-appropriate and medically accurate for grades 7-12."

Yes: To encouraging solid results in math and science. The bill allots \$3 million to create new regional math and science academies that will enhance the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) initiatives. The academies will provide professional development and training for teachers.

Yes: To early childhood literacy, which gets a \$1 million boost for programs like Words Work.

Yes: To families getting money for preschool. Six million dollars is earmarked for the governor's Early Childhood Scholarship Program to provide families of at-risk prekindergartners with scholarships to enter preschool to prepare them for kindergarten. The pilot program will offer 1,500 families living in the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and Nicollet and Blue Earth counties, with \$4,000 allowances for preschool funding.

Yes: To increasing per-pupil funding for Minnesota's children (2 percent in 2008, 1 percent in 2009) at a cost of \$246 million.

Yes: To special education. Schools will be reimbursed \$329 million for special education funding costs. Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Alice Seagren says this reimbursement will benefit all students, not just those in special education. "The federal government mandates special ed, but it hasn't come up with all the money they've promised us," says Seagren. "As a consequence, the state subsidizes it, so this new infusion of special ed money helps soften the blow [in loss of funds] to the General Fund and helps us continue to serve special ed students."

Yes: To dual enrollment high schools, which have had \$13 million allotted for programs like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and College in the Schools. These programs allow high school students to earn college credits for their advanced work, a benefit that families of college-bound students will appreciate according to Seagren. "When students take these courses, they get dual high school and college credit, which is a big bonus because whatever credits they accumulate can add up to as much as a year or two of college under their belts before they leave high school," explains Seagren. "That's a nice incentive and saves money for families."

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