

Fla. House, Senate close on public school spending

BY BILL KACZOR
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Budget proposals advancing in the House and Senate would keep Florida's public school spending about where it is now, but they're some \$600 million apart on higher education.

Senate appropriations committees approved a series of measures Wednesday that will be combined into a single budget bill for the fiscal year beginning July 1. It'll go before the Ways and Means Committee next week, the last stop before a floor vote. House committees still are working with preliminary budget plans that haven't yet reached bill form.

Public schools would get the same \$6,860 for each student they're getting now under a \$22 billion bill (SB 7060) that unanimously cleared the Senate Pre-kindergarten-12 Appropriations Committee. A proposal by Rep. Anitere Flores, a Miami Republican who chairs a corresponding House committee, would increase that by \$30 per student.

"If you look at the bottom line dollars they're very, very close," said Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association. "How they got there is two different things."

Both chambers are banking on more than \$1 billion in federal stimulus money for education, but the House is putting less than a percentage point more overall into public schools and about 10 percent less into higher education than the Senate.

The House higher education proposal also would be a 10 percent spending cut compared with the current year, while the Senate is leaving funding virtually unchanged. Senate Higher Education Appropriations Chairwoman Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, said the House version would result in "dire consequences" for community colleges and state universities.

Her panel approved a \$6.8 billion budget bill (SB 7062) for higher education that includes an 8 percent tuition increase, which would provide \$49.6 million for community colleges and \$116.5 million for universities every year. The House's preliminary budget plans call for a 7 percent tuition increase.

Individual universities - but not community colleges - then could raise the increase to 15 percent under bills moving through both chambers. The state's five largest universities already have such differential tuition authority. This year's legislation would add the remaining six schools and let all 11 schools adopt 15 percent overall increases annually until they reach the national average.

Going up 8 percent would boost tuition for a student taking the average 30 credit hours in a year by \$197 for a total of \$2,658, still among the lowest nationally. At 15 percent, the increase would be \$369 for a \$2,830 total.

The base increase would be covered by the state's performance-based Bright Futures scholarship, but not the differential.

University officials, students and business groups support the tuition increases to help prevent cuts to faculty and courses. Lynn's committee voted unanimously - but without enthusiasm - for the Senate version (SB 762).

"I just don't know what else we can do," said Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach. "We cannot let our university system tumble into the sea."

The Senate Pre-kindergarten-12 Appropriations Committee also approved a conforming bill (SB 1676) that would give school districts more spending and scheduling flexibility.

It also would limit the Florida Virtual School, which offers distance learning statewide, to core courses. That provision drew opposition from virtual learning students and advocates.

Kathryn Groves, a high school student from Keystone Heights, told the panel she took a virtual SAT preparation course that helped her earn scholarships by improving her score on the college entrance test.

"This class is not considered a core course, and students like me who would like to go to college would not be able to raise their SAT scores," Groves said.

Florida Virtual School officials say the provision would cut enrollment about 24 percent by eliminating such electives as personal fitness, Web design, psychology and life management.

Sen. Stephen Wise, the committee's chairman, said the measure would encourage public schools to enroll more students in virtual courses and that the Senate plans to increase Florida Virtual School's funding by 29 percent.

The committee balked at another measure (SB 1678) sponsored by Wise, R-Jacksonville, to increase property taxes in school districts if the education commissioner determined they had violated class-size limits and other state requirements.

"I object strongly to the commissioner all of a sudden becoming the tax czar," said the school boards association's Blanton. "I don't think it's fair to the local taxpayers, and I don't think it's fair to local school board members."

Wise put the measure on hold after committee members also spoke against it.