

3RD GRADE GUARANTEE PROGRAM

House Bill 4443 (Substitute H-1) First Analysis (4-17-97)

Sponsor: Rep. Lingg Brewer
Committee: Education

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Legislation has been introduced to focus additional resources on at-risk children in the earliest grades of school. Supporters cite studies showing that the better prepared children are in the early years, the more successful they are likely to be later in school and, in particular, that students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are likely not to succeed in school. A pilot project has been proposed that would target children in grades K-3 in schools that remain unaccredited by the state.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to specify the eligibility requirements for an "at-risk" school operated by a school district or a public school academy (or charter school) to receive a Third Grade Guarantee Program grant under the State School Aid Act. An at-risk school would be defined as an elementary school determined by the Department of Education to be unaccredited. (The bill also would exclude a district participating in an existing class-size reduction pilot project cited in Section 31a[9] of the State School Aid Act, which applies to the Flint School District.)

To be eligible for a grant, the school district or academy would have to agree to provide one or more of the programs or services listed below.

-- a full-day kindergarten each school day, consisting of at least as many hours of pupil instruction as provided for grades 1-5.

-- a mentoring program for improving reading skills.

-- a sufficient number of qualified classroom teachers in grades K-3 to maintain a pupil-to-teacher ratio of not more than 17 to 1 in each classroom.

-- a teacher training program designed to enable classroom teachers teaching in grades K-3 to maximize the educational opportunities available to pupils in an instructional setting in which the ratio of pupils to teachers is not more than 17 to 1.

-- a parent training program designed to enhance home enrichment and support for the school curriculum.

-- a family resource center located in close proximity to the at-risk school in which the third grade guarantee program was implemented. A family resource center could not serve more than 500 pupils and would have to provide family services, including at least the services of a school social worker with valid social work approval issued by the State Board of Education and a school nurse with a valid school nurse certificate from the board. A family resource center could serve more than one school.

The legislature would be required to appropriate sufficient additional funds to make the third grade guarantee program grants, and the funds would have to be in addition to, and not supplant, other appropriations to the school districts or public school academies operating the at-risk schools. The schools would apply to the Department of Education, and the department would have to ensure that the grant process required the recipients to justify the appropriateness of the programs or services provided. The department also would have to explain its decision in awarding or denying each grant application.

A school district or public school academy receiving funding for an at-risk school under the program would have to submit an annual report to the State Board of Education describing the programs and services offered under the bill and detailing the pupil achievement in the at-risk school.

The Department of Education would have to make available to each participating school a copy of the early childhood standards of quality for pre-kindergarten through second grade as adopted by the State Board of Education on December 15, 1992.

MCL 380.1306

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

According to staff to the House Education Committee, the following schools would be eligible under this bill: Wilson Elementary in Battle Creek; Harding, Sherrard, and Vetal elementary schools in Detroit; Aberdeen, Alexander, Franklin, and Henry elementary schools in Grand Rapids; Cortland Elementary in Highland Park; Angell and Nelson elementary schools in Muskegon; and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Theodore Roosevelt elementary schools in Muskegon Heights. (Seven elementary schools in Flint would qualify but are specifically excluded from House Bill 4443 because they have been participating in a class size reduction project already funded under the State School Aid Act.)

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The cost of this program, if all eligible schools were to be funded for all six programs, has been estimated at about \$15 million, according to information from both Democratic and Republican caucus staffs. An appropriation of \$10 million for the grants is reported to be contained within a proposed substitute (H-1) for House Bill 4310, which would amend the State School Aid Act.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The bill proposes making grants available to certain designated "at-risk" elementary schools in the state to improve the education of children in the earliest grades. Schools that remain unaccredited in the state accreditation process will be able to apply for additional funding if they agree to implement one or more of six research-based programs or services listed in the bill in grades K-3. Reportedly, there are 13 such school buildings in six different school districts. The schools would have to agree to provide full-day kindergarten (which supporters have said gets better results); mentoring programs for improving reading skills; reduced class sizes, with a maximum of 17 to 1; teacher training, so that teachers will make maximum use of smaller class sizes; parent training programs, to improve parental involvement; or family resource centers, including services by a school social worker and school nurse. Districts would apply to the Department of Education for funding and justify the appropriateness of the programs or services, and the department would have to explain its decision to award or deny a grant. The school district receiving a grant would have to describe the programs it implemented with the funds, and detail pupil achievement levels in the school. The grant funding is intended to be in addition to other funding for schools.

The bill recognizes the importance of reaching students in the early grades. It aims at improving the reading

skills of students in the lowest achieving elementary schools. Smaller class sizes, along with teacher training to allow teachers to change their practices to take advantage of smaller class sizes, all-day kindergartens, after-school mentoring, and parent training, all have the potential to improve student reading skills (and improving other academic skills necessary for continued learning). If students are reading at grade level at the end of these early years, their chances of educational success are greatly enhanced.

Against:

Critics of the bill raise a number of concerns. With the creation of a new school financing system, there has been a reduction in "categorical" spending -- state funding of separate programs targeted at specific schools, populations, or purposes -- in favor of a single state grant to schools, who themselves choose spending priorities. The kind of program proposed in this bill would begin again the process of adding categorical spending to the K-12 budget. This is contrary to the spirit of Proposal A (which created the new school funding system). The bill would specify the activities local districts are to employ to help at-risk students in grades K-3 instead of allowing local districts to design their own programs. Critics also point out that state and federal funding already exists for "at-risk students" (although the definition of "at-risk" is different), and they say that the districts that would be eligible for grants under this bill are already receiving substantial funding from the state at-risk categorical program and the federal Title 1 program. If additional funds are to be made available, they should flow through the existing "at-risk" program and not to a new, more narrowly targeted, program. In some ways, targeting just these few schools can be seen as rewarding failure. There is also concern about how the results of this pilot program are to be evaluated; that is, how will it be determined if the grant program has succeeded?

As to the content of the proposed program itself, critics say that while supporters emphasize the importance of focusing on improving reading, the bill does not deal directly with strategies to improve reading skills (except for a mentoring program). Also, doubt has been cast on the notion that reducing class size is a fruitful or cost-effective way of improving education.

POSITIONS:

The Michigan Education Association supports the bill. (4-16-97)

The Michigan Federation of Teachers and School Related Personnel supports the bill. (4-16-97)

A representative from the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children testified in support of the bill. (3-19-97)

The Michigan Association of School Boards is opposed to the bill. (4-16-97)

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.