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California Has a New Way to Fund Public Schools.

The California Board of Education approved emergency rules Thursday for a historic overhaul of school spending designed to direct money to the state's neediest students.

The unanimous board vote followed a marathon Sacramento meeting in which more than 300 educators, civil rights advocates, parents, students and lawmakers made 11th-hour pitches for how districts should spend their money.

The funding formula proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown and approved by legislators last year gives districts additional dollars based on their share of low-income students, English-language learners and foster children. But the Democratic governor and lawmakers left it to the State Board of Education to establish the regulatory rules.

District administrators and civil rights advocates lobbied the board for months over how much leeway schools should have to spend money intended for disadvantaged children. School districts want flexibility to spend such money districtwide, but advocates fear that could dilute the intended impact and benefit more affluent children.

That would put the education system at risk of "doing a little bit for everybody and a whole lot for nobody," said Assemblywoman Shirley Weber, a San Diego Democrat representing the Legislative Black Caucus.

A coalition of 30 education and advocacy groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, Public Advocates and the Children's Defense Fund in California, sought an amendment Thursday requiring that new funding be "principally directed toward serving students in need" and that the strategies for accomplishing that be proved effective, according to David Sapp, staff attorney for the ACLU. The board ultimately approved rules without that change.

"They are emergency regulations," Board President Michael Kirst said. "I believe we should explore the comments heard today ... rather than make changes on the fly without time to truly consider their potential impact and involve all stakeholders."

State Board of Education Member Sue Burr called the vote a "Goldilocks decision ... It's not too hot. It's not too cold."

Kevin Gordon, a longtime school district advocate, said the rules approved Thursday were already a compromise after months of discussion. He said districts can spend on schoolwide and districtwide programs, but they must demonstrate that it is the best way to help disadvantaged students.

Gordon said districts want the ability to "pursue solutions that will dramatically make a difference for the kids in these populations, but may also help other kids, too."

He described a hypothetical program designed to reduce truancy. A district might determine that calling parents frequently can have a dramatic impact on reducing absences among low-income students, but it would not make sense to purposely ignore middle-class students who fail to show up.

The Education Trust-West, an Oakland-based group that advocates for low-income and minority students, suggests a variety of ways that school districts could spend the new money: Improve access to college counseling and academic planning at schools in need. Expand summer school, giving priority to disadvantaged students. Provide health, dental and vision care on a districtwide basis. Give incentives to teachers and principals willing to transfer to the highest-need schools.

Under the funding formula, all school districts receive a base amount of funding. Districts in which needy students exceed 40 percent of enrollment would receive supplemental funding. Districts with disadvantaged enrollments exceeding 55 percent would get even more money, known as concentration grants. The amounts would increase yearly until 2020-21.

The changes come as California's K-12 schools have begun to see a funding surge thanks to a 2012 statewide tax initiative and a spike in capital gains tax revenue that has filled state coffers. Of the \$6.3 billion in additional funds proposed for K-12 schools and community colleges next fiscal year, Brown wants to devote \$4.5 billion toward his local control funding formula.

Brown, who last year said his school funding plan was "a matter of equity and civil rights," made a surprise morning appearance at the board meeting. He told the crowd of hundreds that the most competent level of decision-making must include those on the front lines of education — teachers, neighborhoods, parents and students. Districts are required to solicit opinions through advisory committee meetings; Sacramento City Unified, for instance, has one scheduled Wednesday at its headquarters.

He assured critics that the regulations can improve over time. "We are not omnipotent," he told the group. "A little humility is in order."

After Brown left, a small group of students disrupted the meeting with the loud chant, "Education is life. We fight for our rights," until they were ejected from the meeting.

The formula is expected to bring some of the biggest per-pupil funding increases in the Sacramento region to districts such as Robla Elementary and Woodland Joint Unified, which have high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

The 2,200-student Robla School District with five elementary campuses in the north Sacramento area, has nearly 90 percent low-income enrollment, said Superintendent Ruben Reyes.

"For us, there is not a classroom in my school district that does not have a large number of poor children and English learners," he said in an interview. What is good for the 90 percent needy students, he said, "is generally good" for the other 10 percent.

Jay Hansen, trustee for Sacramento City Unified, said Thursday the proposed regulations are "on target and allows districts like ours to do right by our students and by our families. He said the district "is excited if not daunted by the challenges" of the funding transformation.

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