

EDUCATION DAILY

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Establishment Puts Weight Behind Full Funding Bill

Reps. Charles Bass, R-N.H., and Kent Bentsen, D-Texas, plan to introduce today the latest in a slew of recent bills to fully fund special education, but with a couple of key differences from the rest.

Unlike most of the legislation intended to boost the federal share of states' average per-pupil special education costs to the 40 percent level authorized by law, the bipartisan Bass-Bentsen bill would be binding—and, say education advocates, actually has a good chance of becoming law.

“We see it as the first viable bill because of all the planning and effort that’s gone into it,” said David Egnor of the Council for Exceptional Children, one of an unprecedented nine major education groups backing the legislation.

Most “full funding” bills simply would move around the authorization levels for state grants under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but leave the actual appropriation at the mercy of that annual political brawl known as the budget process.

The Mandatory IDEA Full Funding Act, however, would guarantee increased appropriations by making those grants a mandatory budget item rather than a discretionary program.

If it passes, the federal government would be obliged to boost its share of funding by 5 percent a year for the next five years, a projected \$3 billion annual increase.

Knowing how much money to expect any given year would greatly help states and districts, according to Egnor. “Everybody sets their budgets on a yearly basis, but if you don’t know how much increase you’re going to get, you just can’t plan,” he said.

With record surpluses and broad support for increased funding, special education advocates

hope this will be the year Congress finally puts itself on track toward full funding.

“This is a unique moment,” Egnor said. “We don’t want to miss this opportunity. Agendas change, circumstances change, priorities change—but we feel 27 years [of underfunding] is enough.”

To date, the bill has attracted only 16 co-sponsors, according to a spokeswoman for Bass. Its supporters expect many more members to sign on once the bill is introduced, however, and hope to eventually draw a majority in both houses of Congress.

“There seems to be, in terms of the underlying policy, a real agreement emerging,” Egnor said, echoing a similar assessment from Jordan Cross, a lobbyist for the American Association of School Administrators.

Congress in recent years has already shown itself willing to greatly expand special education funding, culminating with a record 23 percent increase last year.

And with the combined political muscle of the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National School Boards Association, the Council of Great City Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National PTA, and the American Speech-Language Hearing Association behind the bill, its backers are only more optimistic.

Whether the White House will cooperate remains to be seen, however. So far, President Bush has given little indication of the extent to which his administration will support special education. Observers hoped his “budget blueprint”—expected to be released last night—would offer more clues. —**Michael Cardman**

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