

By Steven Cain

Nebraska News Service

Trying to help struggling schools get back on track without the government becoming too involved in the schools is a tough balance to strike, said Sen. Greg Adams of York.

On March 15, the Nebraska Legislature's Education Committee heard testimony on a plan to provide struggling Nebraska schools with assistance to get back on track.

The bill, introduced by Adams, a former high school teacher and chairman of the committee, calls for a new classification system to determine which schools are struggling, as well as introducing measures to help those schools.

Although Adams does not expect his bill to pass this year he said he introduced it to prompt discussion.

Nebraska's school rating system needs to take multiple measurements into account, Adams said, rather than just a simple snapshot of graduation rates.

The bill calls for including, at a minimum, graduation rates, student growth and test performance in assessing schools.

A growth model to gauge improvement of a school is especially important to Adams. He said that while the graduation rate goal is set at 90 percent, some schools will just not be able to attain that goal.

Adams compared it to a high jumper setting a personal goal. He said it's unrealistic to expect every school to be able to reach some goals right away, but the fact that the students are improving means the schools are doing something right.

Under this bill the schools designated "high-priority" would work with the commissioner of education to develop an intervention team to help those schools reach their goals.

Sen. Bill Avery of Lincoln said he was concerned by the fiscal note. Last year a similar bill had an estimated price tag of \$650,000.

Roger Breed, commissioner of education, said that the previous year, the fiscal note reflected the intent to develop the plan in a one-year time span. The new proposal would spread the cost across three years and fit it into the current budget.

This year there was no specific price tag beyond the note that the intervention teams would have an associated cost.

The bill is also supported by the State Board of Education and the Nebraska State Education Association.

There was no opposition at the hearing, but Adams said he expects if he had been promoting this bill more strongly, he would have had a room full of opposition due to school boards' concerns about the proper role for the state.

The education committee took no immediate action on the bill.