

May 23, 2011 11:16 PM

HK: AS BUDGET MELTS DOWN PERRY NEEDS TO STEP OUT AND GIVE COVER

Dewhurst says budget agreement was contingent on a school finance plan

The two most dramatic minutes of the night and perhaps the last several weeks was Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock's acknowledgement that SB 1851 was going down.

In the handful of days Aycock knew he was going to be in charge of, dare we say it, this school finance train. Aycock had worked tirelessly, meeting morning to night with superintendents and superintendent groups, trying to find middle ground.

It was an emotional couple of minutes as Aycock told his colleagues to study up on school finance so they did not have to defer to a handful of experts and a spreadsheet of winning and losing school districts in determining policy for the state.

And then Senate Bill 1581, the almost last chance for a school finance solution this session, went down on a point of order from Rep. Yvonne Davis.

Absent a school finance plan, the current House Bill 1 has school districts run out money in February 2013. And the failure to pass some kind of school finance plan to fit the current budget will leave lawmakers with a \$4 billion hole.

The problem that emerged tonight, it appears, is that Aycock or Rep. Rob Eissler might make a Hail Mary pass with Senate Bill 1811, but the solution won't please the Senate.

Eissler, who talked to reporters after the vote, wants to get his modified proration attached to SB 1811 or some other vehicle, a chance to provide some temporary two-year cuts while working out a more permanent solution on school finance.

Over in the Senate, however, a frustrated Sen. Florence Shapiro said the House was "not ready to deal with, much less talk about, school finance."

Shapiro prompted Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst to admit the Senate expected the House to pass Senate Bill 22 or some version of a school finance solution. Dewhurst wasn't willing to go as far as Shapiro, but Shapiro was ready to say it to the House: Kick out some kind of permanent school finance fix or come back for special session.

Dewhurst did say that the Senate agreement with the House was predicated on passage of SB22 or some comparable plan. His implication was that the entire budget is now in jeopardy.

But let's draw the bottom line here. We're not sure the 150 members of the House are willing to sign onto Eissler's short-term solution or Shapiro's long-term plan.

Unless the House can find an informal consensus in the next several days and glom a school finance package onto another vehicle, the odds are vastly improved we will be back in special session this summer.

The choices are stark:

--one plan that favors wealthy districts

--one plan that favors poor school districts

--one plan that splits the differences

--no plan which means the schools run out of money in February 2013 and the next Legislature faces what some believe would be \$15 billion dollar shortfall for the current year the day they are sworn in.

Oh, there is one more possibility.

Despite all the caterwauling by people who have never had to govern and a governor grandstanding for out of state audiences, the House could do what it should have done from the beginning--Take rainy day dollars and use them on the front end for education.

.Oh, wait, we can't do that. Those rainy day dollars are already committed on the QT for covering the Medicaid nursing home shortfall when that funding runs out in March of 2013. Or was that covered by delaying the 24th month of money to school districts by one month? It's so hard to keep these elements of a conservative fiscal plan straight.

The ball is now in Governor Perry's court. His collaboration with Michael Quinn Sullivan and absence from the serious policy field has left his foot soldiers to get mowed down. Three dozen Republican freshmen provided the anchor for an appropriations bill so austere that only a resolute and unified Senate Republican Caucus saved them from completely leaping off the cliff.

The rant in this story belongs to Harvey Kronberg although a tip of the hat goes to Kimberly Reeves for making sure the facts were correct.

By Harvey Kronberg

Copyright May 23, 2011, Harvey Kronberg, www.quorumreport.com, All rights are reserved