State Board of Education leader promotes governor’s flexibility plan

Top official talks up weighted formula

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SANTA CRUZ — The governor’s point man on education told the leaders of Santa Cruz County’s public school districts Friday that he is working to ease the pain of state cuts.

Michael Kirst, president of the California Board of Education, said Gov. Jerry Brown’s plan to change how funding trickles down from Sacramento to local schools — one that provides more money for students with the greatest needs — is designed to provide greater flexibility for districts long hamstrung by a host of mandates.

Kirst, a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University who served as education board president during Brown’s first term in the 1980s, said there are efforts under way to simplify how student progress is evaluated and to create common standards. He said he supports charter schools but wants more emphasis on accountability.

The hope is to raise California out of the doldrums in terms of per-pupil funding and some performance standards nationwide.

“We’re having the first debate on school finance we’ve had in years,” Kirst told dozens gathered at Cabrillo College. He said Brown wants to “push the power out of Sacramento down into school districts” through what’s called a “weighted pupil formula” that distributes increases in funding for students requiring special education and English-language instruction.

Kirst said after his speech that short of ending Proposition 13, it’s difficult to provide a consistent funding level for schools that isn’t dependent on sales tax and limits on property taxes. He said taxing services, less than products, would provide a new funding stream, to cite just one example.

The governor has tied K-14 funding for 2013 to $7 billion in tax measures proposed for the November ballot. School districts appreciate being able to sweep funds into the classroom that were once locked up for special programs, but they are also concerned about the notion of twisting taxpayers’ arms when the state has undercut a voter-approved minimum-funding level for years.

“I don’t see anything more consistent unless you have a different revenue base,” he said.

In the absence of consistency, spending flexibility is appreciated, said Brian King, president of Cabrillo College.

“The decisions are tough at the local level,” King said. “Given the fiscal reality, being able to make decisions locally is best.”

Sandra Wallace, a member of the Soquel Union Elementary School District, said the concept of flexibility is great, but whether it comes to pass remains to be seen.

“I’m very concerned the state will replace categorical programs with other structures so we will still not have the flexibility we need,” she said.

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