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Alonso plan shifts focus

Schools proposal redirects funds for principals, gifted

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The Baltimore school system would more than quadruple the amount of money it spends on gifted students and funnel more money into high schools under a proposed funding formula that schools chief Andres Alonso unveiled yesterday.

The proposal earmarks about \$22 million for gifted students, \$58 million for struggling students and \$11 million for low-income high school students in the school system's budget for next academic year. The Board of Education is expected to adopt the budget Tuesday.

In proposing to increase spending on gifted education from about \$5 million to \$22 million, Alonso is trying to stop a trend of students performing above grade level when they are young, only to lose that advantage as they age. More than 800 city first-graders last year scored above grade level on standardized tests, compared with 83 seventh-graders. Alonso said that "extraordinary potential" is turning into "wasted potential."

"It is a tragedy that those numbers decline so drastically over time," he said at a school board work session yesterday. "Students don't go from gifted to needing remediation over time because of their contribution. ... It is the school system's failure."

If the board adopts the proposed formula, the central office would no longer send extra teachers for current gifted programs such as the Ingenuity Project and International Baccalaureate because schools would already have the money in their budgets.

Alonso's \$1.1 billion proposed budget for 2008-2009 overhauls the way the system funds its schools, giving principals considerably more discretion over spending in exchange for increased accountability. Making deep cuts in the central office, it shifts from a centralized funding model to one that is school-based.

Because city schools have not been equally funded in the past, that shift could result in drastic gains for some and losses for others. Alonso yesterday proposed caps that would limit the amount of money a school could gain to 10 percent of its budget and limit the amount a school could lose to 15 percent.

Under that scenario, 125 of the system's 190 schools would gain money during the current year, with an average budget increase of \$493,570 apiece. Twenty-one schools that have received disproportionately high levels of funding in the past would lose money, with an average decrease of \$76,822.

Without the caps, 108 schools would gain money and 38 would lose. The average gain would be \$615,309, and the average loss would be \$221,675. The city's middle schools, which received an extra \$7.5 million in funding this year, would be the biggest losers. The scenario Alonso recommends, capping gains and losses, would result in only one middle school losing money.

The city's neighborhood high schools, which have historically been underfunded, would be the biggest winners in any of the scenarios. Alonso said high schools have a short window of time with students before they begin dropping out and they need the resources for intensive interventions. High schools with low-income students do not receive federal Title 1 money to supplement their budgets as elementary and middle schools do.

City principals currently have control of only about \$90 of the \$13,000 the system spends on each of its 81,000 students, with all other decisions centralized. Under the budget Alonso proposed last month, that \$90 figure would increase to about \$5,600.

But the CEO and the board decided they want to give some students more money than others to account for special needs. The recommendations Alonso presented yesterday would cut the base of discretionary money from \$5,600 to about \$5,000 per pupil.

On top of that, principals would receive \$2,200 for each student struggling academically and another \$2,200 for each student above grade level. And high school principals would get an extra \$900 for each student from a low-income family, about the same amount that low-income elementary and middle schools get from the federal government.

The evaluations of who's struggling and who's above grade level would be made at the time children enter a school, so as not to give an incentive for students to keep performing poorly to get the school extra money.

To qualify as struggling, a student would have to fail standardized tests in both reading and math. To qualify as gifted, elementary school students would have to score above grade level on both tests. Middle and high school students would only have to score above grade level on one of the two tests, since far fewer students in those grades are scoring in the advanced range.

School board members were divided in their response to Alonso's proposal. While George M. VanHook Sr. said he'd like to devote any available resources to struggling students, Anirban Basu backed the CEO, pointing out that \$22 million for gifted education is only 2 percent of the system's budget.

Basu said it's misleading to characterize the amount spent on gifted education as quadrupling since the amount currently spent is "almost nothing." Having gifted programs "helps the culture of the schools," he said.

Calling the decisions before the board "excruciating," member Kalman "Buzzy" Hettleman suggested lowering the amount designated for each gifted student from \$2,200 to \$1,000 so as not to shortchange children in the middle. "It's not just the gifted who shrink over the years," Hettleman said, referring to the system's high dropout rate. "Everybody shrinks."

"When it comes to students in the middle, Commissioner Hettleman, there are hardly any," Alonso said, suggesting that schools could not implement meaningful gifted education programs with \$1,000 per student. "This is an opportunity for the system to do gifted right."

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