

# Accountability Act still under discussion

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By Ngoc Vo

As Alabama Senate members return from its annual spring break this week, members will once again address the Alabama Accountability Act.

“It’s one of the first bills (the Senate) will discuss when we get back to session (today),” said Sen. Jimmy Holley, R-Elba.

Holley voted in support for the bill during a Finance and Taxation Education Committee meeting on March 18. However he made clear that he wanted changes to the proposed bill, specifically regarding the definition of failing schools.

The proposed changes originally altered the definition of a failing school, increasing the threshold from to the lowest 10 percent of schools in the state.

Holley said the figure would stay at as it was in 2013, at 6 percent. “Six percent is what I believe it would be,” Holley said.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, who proposed the bill, said during the committee meeting that he was willing to work out the figures and percentage that would help the bill to pass the Senate.

Having a consistent definition of failing schools helps when measuring success, according to Holley.

“The last time we passed the original bill, we were seeking to get the data of failing schools, which was 6 percent,” he said. “If you change the figure, it would skew the data that you gather.”

This year the committee is seeking the same type of data as the last time regarding changes in public school performance and in the AAA scholarship programs, Holley said.

“Hopefully positive changes,” he said. “We will make sure our baseline data is compatible to the data that we got last year, in order to measure one success against another.”

The bill was last discussed in the Senate on March 19. However, the vote on the bill was delayed pending more discussion and changes to the bill.

Sen. Vivian Davis Figures, D-Mobile, voiced her opposition to the bill during the committee meeting. Figures said the AAA scholarship program was taking money away from public schools – money that could be used to pay for expenses such as textbooks.

Holley said he disagreed with the claim that the state money for AAA programs is wasted education funding.

“I don’t believe that is the case,” he said. “It’s still the money invested in children of Alabama. Looking at the impacts of (the Accountability Act), I think (the scholarship programs) enhance education for the children receiving scholarships.

“I think it would be a wise investment of the state to spend on the future of the children.”

Holley said the bill was targeted to help students from failing schools.

“I would prefer those tax dollars to go to students who were in failing schools,” he said. “The purpose of the (upcoming) debate is to address that.”

Holley said he wanted give more choices to the parents of the children in failing public schools.

In addition to the definitions of failing schools, the bill also addresses the scholarship amount and student eligibility.

The cap on what a scholarship granting organization can give to any one

student is proposed to be \$6,000 for elementary school, \$8,000 for middle school and \$10,000 for high school.

The bill also includes lowering the income eligibility to 185 percent of the federal poverty level from 150 percent of the state's median household income.

However, more adjustments are likely to be made before the senate passes the bill.

"We'll see what the changes are," Holley said. "I think the changes would be beneficial for students to attend a better, different school."

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