

House to hold hearings on education bill

by Jake Jarvis
Staff Writer

CHARLESTON — As tensions continue to rise over a proposed plan to reform public education in the Mountain State, delegates are planning to hold two public hearings Monday to get more input on the plan.

The plan, proposed by Republicans in the Senate, would give teachers and school service personnel a 5 percent raise. But it would also permit charter schools, education savings accounts and other provisions that education unions oppose.

When Senate Bill 451 passed last week, Senate President Mitch Carmichael heralded the bill as a fundamental change in the lives and opportunities of all students and teachers in the state.

“Through no fault of students, teachers or parents, we have been mired in a system that leaves far too many of our children behind,” said Carmichael, R-Jackson. “We have a moral imperative to make West Virginia the best place to raise a family, and I am confident that the measures provided in this bill will unlock the door to opportunity for thousands of our children and parents.”

Union leaders called for a vote of their members on whether leaders should be authorized to call for a “day of action,” which could include walking out of classrooms.

Unions leaders were scheduled to meet in Braxton County on Saturday to tally the votes from each county and determine if they have enough votes to call for such an action.

The bill that senators passed includes a nonseverability provision, which means that any successful legal challenge striking down even the smallest part of the bill would strike down the entire bill. Some lawmakers have raised concerns that parts of the bill could violate the state Constitution, raising fears that the teachers’ raises could be at risk.

House Speaker Roger Hanshaw,

who has vowed to move more deliberately and allow more discussion on the bill, officially requested that the House Finance Committee hold public hearings on SB451 Monday. Those hearings, which will take place at 8 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. in the House chamber, will be open to the public.

“We said from the start of our deliberations that we would accept input from all sides in this process, and that includes hearing from our teachers, students, parents and administrators,” Hanshaw said. “A public hearing will allow our citizens and all those affected by this bill the opportunity to have their voices heard.”

“While our Education and Finance committees hear from experts on questions related to this bill, this hearing will allow those on the front lines of our education system to weigh in,” Hanshaw added. “We want to make our education system the best it can be for all involved, and this hearing will provide valuable input on this process.”

The House Education Committee has considered a new version of the bill, called the strike and insert amendment, that removed several of the most controversial provisions.

The proposed strike and insert amendment would limit the number of charter schools to just two schools — one in Cabell County and one in Kanawha County. The two schools would have to be existing Title 1 schools and can be converted into a public charter school.

The proposed amendment also limits education savings accounts to be available just for students with special needs. It also ditches the nonseverability provision and the so-called “paycheck protection” section, which would have stopped union members from being able to deduct their union dues automatically.

See BILL, 4



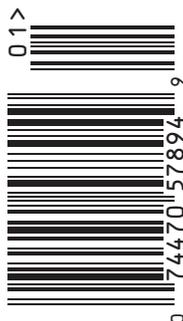
Will Price / West Virginia Legislative photography

Senate President Mitch Carmichael, R-Jackson, oversees discussion of Senate Bill 451 on Feb. 4.



Perry Bennett / West Virginia Legislative Photography

House Education Committee members discuss the Senate's education reform bill during a meeting Wednesday.



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