

## EDUCATION REFORM BILLS CONFERENCE SEEMS LIKELY

Separate legislation in the House and Senate addressing failing schools will probably require a conference committee to resolve, a leading Senate Republican said.

Sen. Wayne Kuipers (R-Holland), chair of the Senate Education Committee, said in an interview this week that he likes parts of the House-passed bills that would empower the state superintendent to hire a reform officer for schools that have received scores of 30 percent or less in proficiency for math and science, failing to make adequate yearly progress, for four consecutive years.

But Mr. Kuipers has introduced Senate legislation that instead approaches education reform by enabling a majority of parents in a school building to essentially secede from the school district and take ownership of school operations there.

"I think there's some good components there," Mr. Kuipers said of the House bills. "My sense is we'll have some good, meaningful reform legislation."

Mr. Kuipers did not specify what parts of the House bills (HB 4787, HB 4788 and HB 4789) that he liked, saying that broadly the House's movement on school turnaround legislation is positive.

Like the House legislation, the Senate bills (SB 636, SB 637, SB 638 and SB 639) are pending in the Senate Education Committee. Mr. Kuipers said he expected the committee would either move a combination of the House and Senate bills or simply approve all of the bills with the eventual use of a House-Senate conference committee to complete negotiations.

The advantage of the Senate plan is that it empowers parents and teachers to free themselves of a broken school administration, Mr. Kuipers said. The bills would allow a majority of parents of a school's pupil population, combined with a majority of the school's teachers, to convert a school to a "neighborhood public school."

They would apply to any of the following for a contract to organize and operate the school: the State Board of Education, the board of a school district, the board of an intermediate school district, the board of a community college, the governing board of a public university or the mayor of a city with a population of at least 65,000.

"They're able to take over a school and say,

"This is our school," Mr. Kuipers said of parents and teachers.

Similar bills (HB 5237 and HB 5238) introduced this week in the House call them "conversion schools".

After years of discussion about whether to raise or eliminate the limit on universities from authorizing no more than 150 charter schools, the idea appears to have no traction this year. Mr. Kuipers said he has no interest in pursuing a removal of the so-called charter cap, which historically leads to a "huge food fight."

Rep. Tim Melton (D-Auburn Hills), chair of the House Education Committee, said he and Mr. Kuipers have discussed each other's legislation. He said he would support whatever action Mr. Kuipers felt necessary to get movement, given a federal deadline in December for the U.S. Department of Education's "Race to the Top" program that will award grants to states creating the conditions for education innovation and reform.

The Department of Education also is working on plans to attract that money to the state.

"I think the concept that we could pull everything together in conference makes sense," Mr. Melton said. "Because of the budget and everything else, we don't have much time."

Mr. Melton said he expected the Senate bills would change as they move through the process like the House bills.

Still, Mr. Melton said he has some concerns about the Senate legislation, mainly the lack of any criteria to qualify a school to be taken over by its parents and teachers.

The House bills target about 30 out of the state's 3,700 schools. A reform officer would have the power to authorize a turnaround school or the state could take over the school if the school failed to make progress under the reform officer's recommendations.

"We were trying to fix the schools that have been traditionally broken," Mr. Melton said. "I'm willing to compromise, but I'm not going to give up the concept that we need to fix the schools that are the worst performing."

Ed Sarpolus, director of government affairs for the Michigan Education Association, said the union supports the House plan because it gets to the root of the problem, be it administrators, teachers or

something else. He called the Senate bills a backdoor move to eliminate the charter school cap because such schools would essentially be akin to charter schools.

The Senate plan also would divide a school's resources in half, Mr. Sarpolus said.

"Let's identify the problem, not just move kids to another building," he said.

Michael Van Beek, director of education policy for the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, said both plans have merit although he worries about the House plan eventually getting watered down.

"I think there is promise here," he said.

But Mr. Van Beek said eliminating the charter school cap is the best approach because universities have experience in running independent schools.

In the past, plans similar to the ones

moving through the Legislature have died quick deaths. A plan during the 2001-02 term to allow state takeovers of several troubled school districts went nowhere, nor did former Governor John Engler's 1998 "Freedom Schools" proposal, which like Mr. Kuipers' would have let parents petition for control of their school.

Years later, major legislation looks likely.

"I think, sadly, the reason for that is the massive failure of the Detroit Public Schools," said Mr. Van Beek, pointing to the seemingly endless corruption and mismanagement that state-appointed emergency financial manager Robert Bobb has uncovered. "I think the Legislature is looking at Detroit Public Schools and saying something has to be done."