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Senate Panel Shifts Stimulus Education Money

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HELENA - Critics said Republican changes Wednesday to stimulus spending plans shortchange Montana schools, while supporters said they are necessary to make sure the state doesn't spend too much money.

The state Senate Finance Committee on Wednesday night rewrote pieces of the House spending plan for almost \$900 million in federal stimulus money, known as House Bill 645. Democrats and Republicans continued to clash over spending plans, setting up lengthy, contentious budget battles as the Legislature draws to a close.

The panel on Wednesday shifted more than \$30 million in federal money to restore cuts to state support for K-12 education that the committee earlier made in the main budget, House Bill 2. Republicans in control of the Senate said they are trying to reduce state spending in case the recession has a worse-than-anticipated effect on state finances. They also argue commitments of state money to those programs could be hard to maintain in future budgets.

Democrats said the GOP-controlled Senate panel is not helping schools by shifting funding sources around. They argue that education is getting the short end of the stick.

Critics said the Republican moves take other money tagged for education to cover the basic education funding increases that the panel cut in the other bill. They argue education is getting the short end of the stick.

"There is not nearly enough money here to overtake what we are throwing overboard," said Sen. David Wanzenried, D-Missoula. "It just doesn't make any sense."

Republicans counter that education is getting \$160 million more overall than it did in the last two-year budget cycle.

Democrats and Republicans on the panel also clashed over the GOP majority party's moves to cut money out of the stimulus plan the House set aside for worker training, mental health, broadband grants and other areas.

At the same time, some Democrats objected to a piece of the Republican plan that sends another \$500,000 to the private Montana Meth Project for a total of \$1 million.

The budget battle has several more steps before the Legislature wraps up its work this month.

On Thursday, the full Senate takes up House Bill 2. The most contentious issue revolves around a Republican plan to not fully fund Initiative 155 to expand the Children's Health Insurance Plan. Next week the full Senate takes up the stimulus spending plan.

Republicans, who control the Senate 27-23, said they believe they have the votes to keep their changes intact.

The House and Senate will then have to resolve their differences in conference committees.