

Smiles, questions greet news

By Leon Lagerstam
Staff writer

U.S. Senate approval of a \$26.5 billion education bill Tuesday pleased but surprised some local school administrators.



Cal Lee

Moline superintendent Cal Lee and Rock Island County Regional Superintendent of Schools Joe Vermeire, for example, thought the Senate would delay a decision because of mounting evidence against standardized testing.



Joe Vermeire

Please see **React**, A2

React

From Page A1

The bill calls for students in third- through eighth-grade to be tested every year in reading and math. Results would be used to judge school performances.

A National Council of School Administrators recently opposed annual testing plans, citing growing evidence that standardized tests do more harm than good, Mr. Lee said. So he was surprised the bill passed so quickly and decisively.

The House earlier approved the measure 381-41. The Senate vote was 87-10. President George W. Bush is expected to sign the bill into law within days.

"The bottom line is it's \$8 billion more," Mr. Vermeire said. "Those federal funds are certainly welcome, especially considering the financial situation the state of Illinois has gotten itself into."

However, he, too, was surprised to see the bill pass because of the standardized testing debate.

"I thought they would hold off and look at more research," Mr. Vermeire said. "There's research showing up all over saying testing doesn't improve learning."

He recalled Sen. Vince Demuzio once saying "weighing a pig doesn't necessarily make the pig bigger."

Mr. Vermeire also cited efforts in North Carolina to annually test students, but the state's drop-out rate climbed to 32 percent.

Rock Island-Milan assistant superintendent J. Jay Marino said he doesn't think annually testing all grades will change much of what schools are already doing. It basically adds reading and math tests for students in fourth- and seventh-grades. Students in other grades already take Illinois Standards Achievement Tests in reading

and math, he said.

"Throwing in a couple more years of reading and math tests so someone in Washington can compare scores across the country doesn't seem to me to be a good use of the limited learning time we already have," Mr. Vermeire said.

"In general, I see this legislation as trying to standardize a level of achievement and expectation for all schools in the nation," Mr. Marino said. "The law will simply try to raise the bar for everyone and assure it is happening throughout the nation."

Trying to do a national test for everyone, however, could develop standards "somewhere in the middle," Mr. Lee said. Those standards might not be as specific as they should be in some areas of the country, and might be too specific in other places, he said.

It's better, he said, to tie assessments to local conditions.

"I'm all for assessing kids and progress, but whether this is the way to go is the question," he said.

Many other programs in the bill are already under way in local districts, administrators said.

The bill's requirement to develop plans to close achievement gaps between low-income and middle-class students and between white and minority students is being done in local schools.

"We definitely see an achievement gap between minorities, and we are in the process of developing an action plan, with or without legislation mandating it," Mr. Marino said.

Another requirement, giving

an English test to students with limited English proficiency, is being done in Moline's bilingual program, Mr. Lee said.

The bill also requires schools to show that all teachers are qualified to teach their subjects.

"They are assuming we're not doing that now," Mr. Lee said. "We don't knowingly put anyone into classrooms who is not qualified to be there, and we check that carefully."

The bill gives districts more flexibility in how they spend federal money, although it is less latitude than originally sought.

It could, however, pose difficult decisions, Mr. Lee said.

For example, money for teacher improvement can be used for pay raises, training or more teachers.

"Money spent on staff development is money well spent," Mr. Lee said. "But how can one argue against putting more teachers in the classroom. We need them both."

Seeing final facts and figures, however, makes planning easier, Mr. Marino said.

Tests must be coordinated, in some way, to make sure students aren't being over-assessed, he said.

Results must be used to improve, not punish, schools, Mr. Vermeire said. What it does to students' self-esteem also must be considered, he said.

The bill would give failing schools more money, but if scores don't improve in six years, schools could be restaffed.

Students in failing schools also could use federal money to pay for independent tutoring or transportation to another public school. It could not be used to pay tuition at private schools.

"I don't think we'll end up in the scenario of one of our schools being restaffed," Mr. Vermeire said. "Even in our schools having academic difficulties, they are improving."



J. Jay Marino