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## Finneran vows to end school activities fees

By Raphael Lewis

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House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran said he will fight to end the growing practice of school districts charging fees to students participating in afterschool sports and other extracurricular activities, saying that it is among his highest priorities for the upcoming legislative session.

"I think we're making a dreadful, dreadful mistake when we begin to put a price on extracurricular activities, that there's a fee for athletics, for drama, for band, for glee club, for the yearbook committee," Finneran said in an interview. "To tell a parent who's already paying all their taxes that, by the way, for Brenda to play soccer and Joey to play football, we require two \$500 checks. The citizen is sitting there saying, 'You've got to be kidding me.' "

Such fees were rare just a few years ago. But after a fiscal crisis led lawmakers to slash school funding by 20 percent, school districts have imposed fees that in some cases exceed \$1,000 for playing football.

Fees have become so common and have risen so quickly that Saugus parents said they were relieved this month when the School Committee raised the district's \$200 team sports fee by \$50, instead of \$100, as the panel had threatened.

The Massachusetts Association of School Committees, which has surveyed 214 of the state's 329 school districts, says that about three-quarters of districts polled charge parents a fee for before- and afterschool programs such as drama, music, chess club, and yearbook. About half charge for sports programs.

Since Jan. 1, 2002, 58 communities have attempted to make up for cuts in state aid by raising property taxes. But raising taxes requires voter approval to override Proposition 2 tax limits, and many recent attempts were defeated at the polls. Those districts were left with little choice but to eliminate nonmandatory extracurriculars or to charge students to participate.

"School Committees are looking at their budgets and trying to do what's right," said Mike Gilbert, a field director for the school committee association. "The parents demand that we provide those services, so we go to fees to make sure the services are provided."

Finneran, who said he was sympathetic to district officials who turned to fees when state aid, called Chapter 70 funds, dried up. He gave no specifics on his plans for legislation, but indicated that a prohibition on fees would be accompanied by additional state funds.

"I realize that with the constraints of 2 and the inability of the state to provide generous increases in Chapter 70 money over the past few years that something has to give," Finneran said. "The quicker we can remedy fees-based extracurricular funding as a course of conduct, the better off we will be."

Gilbert said additional funding would be crucial if schools are to be able to offer extracurricular activities without fees.

"They would have to tie some form of aid specifically inside of the Chapter 70 aid formula per pupil, as well as a requirement that these things be free to students," Gilbert said. "My least favorite three words are 'subject to appropriation,' and that's what happens with school transportation. They say they'll pay for it, but the reimbursement rates are lower than the actual costs."

Finneran, a Mattapan Democrat, said that in addition to ending fees he wants to pass legislation aimed at improving MCAS test scores statewide, saying that Massachusetts, while competitive nationally, can do better.

"We have to make sure that we don't slacken around education," Finneran said. "From my economic perspective, it's imperative that we keep Massachusetts students at the forefront of their peers. . . . We all know we have to do better. We're doing OK on the MCAS pass rates -- we're doing better than we may have thought -- but we don't want to talk about merely passing, but to talk about proficiency and excellence."

In addition, Finneran said he hopes to beef up funding of the University of Massachusetts system, which has suffered under dramatic budget cuts in the past three years. Finneran said his goal is to enhance a matching grant program instituted about a decade ago by former Senate president William M. Bulger and Senator Stanley C. Rosenberg, Democrat of Amherst. "I think that was one of the great success stories of the mid- and late '90s," Finneran said.