A school finance bill that was rammed through the Colorado Senate at lightning speed last week has hit a roadblock in a key House committee.

“We’re not going to fast track something that’s so important,” said Rep. Judy Solano, D-Brighton, the vice-chair of the House Education Committee. “We’re going to slow down a bit and have some thoughtful conversation about it.”

Senate Bill 256, touted by its sponsors as ground breaking reform with emphasis on at-risk children, was introduced on Monday, March 30, approved by two committees during the week and passed both second and third readings in the full Senate by Friday.

Sen. Roy Romer, D-Denver, argued passage of the bill as he introduced it would put Colorado in the front-runner’s position to receive federal funds under President Barack Obama’s school incentive program called “A Race to the Top.”

District 1 Sen. Greg Brophy, R-Wray, was one of only two senators—Sen. Kevin Lundberg, R-Berthoud was the other—to vote against the bill, saying it was bad for rural school districts.

“The school finance bill was exceptionally hard on small rural schools this year,” said Brophy, whose sprawling eastern plains district includes 42 school districts. “They took a year away from student averaging, from five to four, and also got into the size factor, which is critically important to the small rural school district.”

Brophy said he succeeded only last year in getting the student average spread out over more years, which helps district where enrollment is dropping.

“Now they’re taking it away again,” he said.

But it is the complicated formula contained in SB 246 for funding children in the at-risk category that most concerns Solano and other Democrats on the House Education Committee, which has yet to schedule a hearing on the measure.

“It sort of takes away from our focus on early childhood education and changes the way we previously funded at risk kids to focus on those high poverty schools in certain pockets of the state,” said Solano, a retired school teacher. “I think this at-risk money is too important statewide to have it concentrated in just the Denver area,” she said.

As it currently stands, the school finance bill pumps almost $5.7 billion into public education for the 2009-10 fiscal year—a 6.39 percent increase—with almost $3.7 billion of the total coming from state funds. The rest is raised through local property taxes.

Total funding per pupil would increase from $6,621 to $6,948 for Brighton School District 27J; from $6,914 to $7,253 for Burlington School District; from $6,545 to $6,879 for Sterling (Logan Valley School District); $6,982 to $7,338 for Fort Morgan School District; from $7,224 to $7,604 for Holyoke School District; from $8,771 to $9,260 for Haxtun School District; from $6,689 to $7,022 for Julesburg School District; from $7,463 to $7,868 for West Yuma; and from $7,324 to $7,695 for East Yuma.

Brophy and Sen. Mary Hodge, D-Brighton, split their votes Monday on Romer’s controversial bill to grant in-state college tuition rates to high school graduates who are in the United States illegally.

After four hours of contentious debate, five Democrats joined 13 Republicans to defeat Senate Bill 170 on a 16-18 vote.

Proponents argued passionately that most of the targeted students were brought into the country as babies or young children and had no choice about where they live or go to school.

Hodge said her vote for the bill was a vote to support education of all children.

“I don’t think children should be forever penalized because of the actions of their parents,” she said.

Opponents argued just as passionately that Colorado has no business rewarding or granting additional benefits to illegal immigrants, no matter how long they have resided in Colorado.

“This was really just the wrong thing to do…to reward folks for doing something illegally,” said Brophy.

Brophy and Hodge will be spending most of this week trying to take the target off the back of higher education funding as lawmakers try to balance the state budget for next year. The Joint Budget Committee has said there is no way to do it without cutting another $300 million from state support of colleges and universities.

“It’s really ugly,” said Hodge of the state’s budget dilemma, where state revenue collections have fallen more than $1.5 billion short of last year’s projections. “I’m getting a lot of push back from higher ed but I don’t know the alternative. We’ve got to balance the budget and have to find money from somewhere.”

Brophy said the legislature’s minority Republicans are cooking up a strategy to put pressure on Gov. Bill Ritter to save funding for higher education.

“We really need to develop a strategy to hold the governor’s feet to the fire with regards to the $700 million in stimulus dollars that are coming into the state,” Brophy said. “Those funds are discretionary and we need him to fill the gap for higher ed in this case.”

The debate on the so-called “long bill,” which details state expenditures for the fiscal year that begin July 1, likely will further delay debate and a vote on a controversial bill that Brophy is sponsoring in the Senate.

House Bill 1180, which has passed the House, would exempt anyone who already has a permit to carry a concealed weapon from having to undergo further background checks to buy a gun at a gun show.

“I have the votes to pass it and they (the Democrat leaders) don’t know what to do with it,” Brophy said. “They may try to hold it on the calendar until the tenth anniversary of Columbine (April 20) and try to bring it up.”

“It’s really not that big a deal,” he said. “All this bill does is say that if you’ve gone to the extra work of doing the full blown, fingerprint background check to get concealed carry permit, don’t have to do the Brady check.”

Opponents include police chiefs and sheriffs who argue the measure goes against the intent approved by votes in the wake of Columbine that requires a background checks for all gun-show sales.