http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/education-s5.jpg



Sen. Smith writes about public education and the impact of referenda in funding local schools.

MADISON - Last Tuesday was a big election day for Wisconsin. It was an even bigger election day for public education. Many Wisconsin school districts were able to pass crucial referenda to keep operating, some weren't so lucky.

Some school districts are one bad referendum away from closing. We cannot educate our children on political whims alone, we need assurance from the state that education funding is a priority.



Unfortunately, lurching from one referendum to the next has become the norm for school districts, but it hasn't always been like this. Don't get me wrong, K-12 funding has always been a matter of friction between political philosophies for decades, but agreements have been

reached.

Disagreements came to a head in 1993 when the state adopted a school funding formula that capped revenue for districts at the level they were at that year. As a compromise, the state also promised to fund 2/3 of the total cost for educating our children.

The twenty-six year old formula is complicated, and it's influenced by many different factors. The two most important factors are student enrollment and total property valuation within the district. Thus, if a district's enrollment is bursting at the seams plus their property values are low, they receive a larger per pupil subsidy than a district with decreased enrollment and high property values.

Over the years, this formula has proven to fall short of our constitutional obligation to provide an equitable education to all children in Wisconsin. We live in a time now when one bad election turnout can force schools to close.

Politicians who support the current funding system would often say that voters could determine their support for their schools through referendum. That thinking seemed logical to some when referenda proved terribly difficult to pass. As state funding has been cut, schools are struggling to meet the needs of the communities. Referenda have become the only option to keep up.

Since 2011 the rate of success in passage has been overwhelming. In 2011 39 referenda passed while 31 failed. In 2014 80 passed while 38 failed. In 2018 141 passed and only 16 failed! Just last week 44 of 59 referenda questions passed.

