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A federal funding flood followed by a school finance drought

MADISON - The horrifying school shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas was dominating the news as the Milwaukee school board finalized the district's preliminary budget for the coming year on May 26.

Just a few weeks earlier, school budget debates were focused on learning loss. Some school officials were pushing the message that students' mental health was just as important. Now the conversation was dominated by the question how can we keep students safe from gun violence.

After Uvalde, it became painfully obvious that a school resource police officer (SRO) with a handgun is no match for a shooter armed with a military style weapon shooting hundreds of rounds in a few seconds. Defenders of gun rights wanted to focus more on mental health. Both enhanced security and enhanced mental health services take lots of adults in school buildings, and that takes lots of money.

Even before the shootings in Texas, the Milwaukee school board was wrestling with where to put money in the budget to accomplish those goals. Student activists with the group Leaders Igniting Transformation came before the MPS budget committee asking that money be

transferred from school safety personnel to psychological and social services and to other areas that support the wellbeing of students. The same group had pushed the district to end its contract with Milwaukee police in 2020 for SROs.

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) also removed SROs in 2020. Reestablishing the program became an issue in the April 5 election. Winning candidate Laura Simkin advocated the return of SROs. But Simkin's issues went far beyond a single issue as she stated on her website: "We should increase the number of student services staff, including psychologists, social workers, special education staff, and counselors."

MMSD will adopt its preliminary budget on June 27. Neither MPS or MMSD will reestablish SROs this year. They will hire more adults to work with students to lower conflicts and resolve personal issues students have from the pandemic and challenges they face in the community.

Finding the money to hire those adults right now is not a problem. What comes after is.

After the pandemic hit, schools had to go virtual and invest in laptop computers, ventilation systems, food delivery services and the like with money they did not have. A series of federal grants from the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief fund (ESSER) flowed into schools all across the nation. Money could be used for virtually anything related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of the $2.4 billion Wisconsin ESSER funds, MPS received $797.2 million (33.4%); MMSD received $70.6 million (3%). Allocations were based upon the number of students each district had living in poverty as measured under Title I.

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