

School Budget Proposal Brings Needed Relief

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the 2017-19 biennial budget proposal by State Superintendent of Schools Tony Evers. How will the recommendations help public schools, particularly small rural schools?

MADISON - “Over the past four years, we have seen an increased reliance on referenda to keep the lights on,” State Superintendent Tony Evers announced as he released his school budget proposal.

“Around the state, local communities took the lead on funding reform through the ballot box, but the state has to be a good partner and do our share to help small town schools.”

Indeed. This year, Wisconsinites passed a record number of school referenda.

In the recent election, 82% of school referenda passed. Over the last four years, citizens in more than half of Wisconsin’s school districts voted to raise their property taxes to pay for schools.

Why? Because state spending for public schools this year is less than it was eight years ago, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau. This does not include public spending for the variety of private school options.

Mr. Evers created a blueprint to fix the funding of local schools. No district in the state will be hurt by his plan.

He proposes repairing the historic budget cuts of the past few years, including cuts to a special

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aid I added to the school formula in 2007 known as sparsity. The proposal would expand the number of rural districts eligible for sparsity aid.

The plan provides grants to assist in recruiting and retaining rural teachers. Wisconsin is awash with stories of rural schools struggling to find and keep teachers.

Many rural superintendents point to the impact of transportation costs on their budgets, noting the state pays less than a tenth of the cost of bringing students to and from school. This leaves rural students with fewer resources to learn, as more of the school's budget goes to fuel and buses.

Mr. Evers addresses this problem in two ways: by increasing funds for transporting students over 12 miles away and by helping schools with unusually high busing costs.

Childhood poverty increased dramatically statewide over the past ten years. Teachers share stories of bringing extra food and clothing for students in need. However, the needs go beyond the physical. Children living in poverty can succeed but they need extra support from the school.

Mr. Evers' budget recommendation provides extra support by adding a new poverty factor to the general aid formula. This change will assist many rural districts hurt by the current funding formula, which equates wealth with property value instead of income. Rural districts in tourist areas suffered for many years. Pepin, for example, last year received only \$1,381 per student in general school aid.

As Mr. Evers' budget reads: "The State Superintendent believes that property value alone is no longer an adequate measure for the ability to pay, as it doesn't serve areas with high-priced vacation homes and large populations of year-round residents that live in poverty. The State Superintendent believes that local family income should also be a factor in measuring a district's 'wealth' in determining the distribution of state general equalization aid."

In addition to accounting for income, Mr. Evers proposes raising the general aid minimum to \$3,000 for every student.

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Creating a minimum aid for all districts will reduce the need for low-aided districts to ask voters to raise their property taxes through referenda. Equally important the new plan adds an inflationary increase in state funds available to schools districts to keep up with rising costs.

Another problem facing a majority of school districts is declining enrollment. The loss of students translates to a loss of state aid. Many small rural schools are losing students faster than the district can cut costs. Mr. Evers makes several changes that ease the impact of declining enrollment.

Mr. Evers offers many other changes in the way Wisconsin pays for schools, including aids to schools with a high number of English Language Learners, like Arcadia whose elementary school enrolls over 70% ELL students. He assists students struggling with mental health challenges, which he estimates effects one in five students.

I am encouraged by Mr. Evers' thoughtful and comprehensive proposal. His blueprint for Wisconsin schools gives every child, regardless of background or zip code, an opportunity to succeed.

We now need our governor and legislators to share the same goal and pass Mr. Evers' 2017-19 biennial budget for schools.