

- Monday, July 19, 2010 – Green Bay Press Gazette

Editorial: There's still no magic formula to fit state

The latest general state aid estimates for Wisconsin school districts remind us that the battle to find a better way forward in terms of school finance will be ongoing and difficult.

For 2010-11, the Green Bay School District is set to receive an additional \$5.5 million in general aid, about a 4.38 percent increase and the largest dollar-figure bump of any district in Wisconsin, according to June estimates from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. District officials estimate the actual increase will be closer to 2.4 percent because Green Bay underspent its 2009-10 budget, and aid estimates are based on actual spending, rather than the amount budgeted.

Still, the general aid increase is good news for district taxpayers, who likely will see a levy increase of less than 5 percent for 2010-11, said Alan Wagner, the district's assistant superintendent for business and finance. Elsewhere in Northeastern Wisconsin and throughout the state, many districts will see levy increases closer to 6 or 7 percent, Wagner said. Green Bay's aid increase is due largely to property values that decreased last year, giving the district an advantage — at least in one sense — over those that are more property-rich.

General school aid from the state is distributed based on factors including enrollment, shared costs and property value from the previous school year. The aid amounts are certified in October.

What the aid figures don't change is Green Bay's persistent budget deficits, which consistently add up to \$6 million to \$8 million a year with no end in sight — unless, as many officials hope, changes are made to how Wisconsin schools are funded.

Elsewhere in the area, the general aid picture looks considerably different. The Ashwaubenon School District stands to lose about \$1.8 million in general state aid, a 15 percent drop. The numbers are more dramatic in property-rich districts like Gibraltar, which estimates say will take a whopping 55 percent hit in general aid for 2010-11.

State aids, of course, are just one piece of an incredibly complex Wisconsin school finance formula puzzle. They've also been part of various proposals to change how Wisconsin schools are funded, including State Superintendent Tony Evers' recently released framework.

Among other things, Evers' proposal would ensure that no district would face drastic reductions in state school aid from one year to the next. It also would provide a minimum level of aid for every student, and proposes using student poverty — not just property values — as a factor in state aid.

Last year, the School Finance Network, a statewide coalition dedicated to making education funding more equitable, presented a funding reform proposal of its own. Components of that plan included changing the way per-pupil spending increases are calculated, as well as increasing categorical aids for small rural districts, and for children with disabilities and low-income students.

The proposal calls for significant increases in state aid, which the group says could be paid for in a variety of ways — including closing corporate tax loopholes and changing the sales tax system. And therein lies the rub, no matter whose proposal you consider.

"Finding additional money for school funding is really the issue," Wagner said, "that has got to be resolved for these funding plans to move forward."

We're glad education leaders are looking at ways to improve the way our schools are funded, and we encourage ongoing efforts in this vein. But with state budget deficit estimates now hovering around \$2.5 billion for the next biennium, additional funds will be difficult to find.