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Nekoosa school leader lauds state superintendent's funding proposal

By Adam Wise • Daily Tribune Staff • November 22, 2010

A proposal to reform the state's school funding system would have a significant positive impact on school districts such as Nekoosa, a school official says.

One major component of Wisconsin School Superintendent Tony Evers' recently announced plan would involve taking almost \$900 million that's currently used to provide residents property tax relief through the school tax levy credit and using it for general state school aid funding. The levy credit has increased about 90 percent in the past five years.

If incoming Republican Gov. Scott Walker and the Legislature support Evers' plan, nearly all of the state's more than 400 school districts would benefit, Nekoosa School District Business Manager Lynn Knight said.

"From what I understand, there are no losers. If anything, there are like 23 school districts who will have no change, but nobody will lose anything," Knight said. "There's no new funding; it's just how it's being allocated to the school districts now."

In a released statement, Evers said his plan, which he calls "Fair Funding for Our Future," is a first step in helping public schools.

"No matter where you live or work in our state, if we are to build and sustain Wisconsin's economic future, we must do better for our public schools," Evers said. "It reforms school finance, protects taxpayers, addresses significant educational needs and builds a foundation for the future."

School districts receive state aid based on a formula that includes the district's equalized property value and student enrollment. The plan proposed by Evers would establish a \$3,000 minimum level of state aid to districts for each student and would factor in student poverty levels.

Nekoosa's district, for example, would receive about \$2 million more annually in state aid. Knight said

the district currently receives just less than \$4 million in state aid and has a total general operating fund of about \$14.5 million.

A formula that takes poverty levels into account is key for districts such as Nekoosa, which has nearly 50 percent of its student population receiving free or reduced-price lunches based on their families' incomes, Knight said.

While Evers' plan doesn't fix the system, Knight said, it's a step in the right direction.

"It allows for the districts that are property rich and economically poor to have a fair shake," she said. "It can't be based on property value alone."

Another feature of Evers' plan is an increase in general school aid by 2 percent in the first year and 4 percent in the second year of the 2011-13 biennial state budget. Reimbursement levels for special education, bilingual education, Student Achievement Guarantee in Education and school breakfast programs would remain the same.

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