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Sidebar: Innovation in Education

‘Fair Funding’ plan supports innovation in education

PRAIRIE DU SAC — In his “Fair Funding for Our Future” plan for changing the way Wisconsin supports its public schools, State Superintendent Tony Evers proposes targeting dollars from a number of categorical aid programs to better serve students.

The “Fair Funding” plan calls for maintaining 2010-11 reimbursement levels in the next budget for five areas of greatest need: special education, high-cost special education, bilingual/bicultural education, Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE), and school breakfast. The plan reduces the 32 state taxpayer-funded categorical aid programs by one-third. It introduces three new aid programs to support increasing graduation rates and reducing dropouts; voluntary use of adaptive, college, and career-ready assessments; and provide census-based aid for students who are learning English.

The plan consolidates 10 existing categorical aid programs to fund a new competitive grant to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts. Starting in 2012-13, districts that have persistent graduation or dropout issues will be able to compete for \$20 million in grants for locally identified efforts to increase the number of students who graduate. The proposed “Every Child a Graduate” grant program will hold districts accountable for meeting state- and locally defined “on track” indicators, which may include credit deficiency, grades, and attendance. The DPI will implement a variable funding model for the multi-year grants that will consider whether participating districts meet or miss performance goals.

“Wisconsin needs every student to graduate ready for the workforce or further education,” Evers stated. “This competitive grant program will support innovative efforts and hold districts accountable for results.”

In 2012-13, districts will share \$3.2 million for various assessments administered to all students. The plan proposes reimbursing one-half of the cost for districts that administer an 11th-grade college-preparatory assessment (such as the ACT), ninth- and 10th-grade college and career preparation assessments (such as PLAN and Explore), and third- through eighth-grade benchmark assessments. Benchmark assessments offer immediate feedback for

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teachers, students, and their parents. They are designed to provide harder questions when students answer correctly and easier questions to determine where students need additional instruction. Currently, half of Wisconsin's school districts use on-line, adaptive assessments. Districts could choose to offer one, two, or all three types of assessments. All districts would administer the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination for state and federal accountability purposes until new assessments are available through Wisconsin's participation in the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.

"We want to encourage district adoption of assessments that make sense to their local communities," Evers said. "Additionally, this aid will help us evaluate how well districts are prepared to administer on-line assessments."

To better meet Wisconsin's constitutional obligation to serve students who are English-language learners (ELLs), the proposed plan offers \$3.4 million in new aid in 2012-13 for districts that have small numbers of ELL students. All districts must provide bilingual services to ELL students. Districts are required to have a bilingual program and qualify for current bilingual/bicultural aid if they have between 10 and 20 students in a language group in a school, depending on grade levels. The new categorical aid would provide \$100 for each ELL student who is not in a required program, which accounts for more than 40 percent of all ELL students in the state.

Also in the second year of the biennium, the Department of Public Instruction proposes offering \$1.8 million for improving educator effectiveness. The grant consolidates existing aid for peer review and initial mentors to provide more flexibility. District could apply for a grant to evaluate initial and veteran teachers, develop and implement strategies for intensive intervention and assistance for those educators who are underperforming, or implement new research-based strategies to improve student achievement.

Additionally, the proposed budget seeks an increase of approximately \$22 million in state funding to support the Milwaukee Parental Choice program and increase the state's share of the program's costs to protect Milwaukee taxpayers. The budget requests approximately \$21.5 million in additional state aid for independent charter schools in Milwaukee and Racine and makes these schools eligible for state transportation aid.

"Changes to categorical aid programs target funding where it is needed most," Evers said. "We know the importance of quality educators in our schools and classrooms, we know we can improve education with better assessments, and we know that every child needs the opportunity to graduate ready for the workforce or further education. This plan provides solutions that are good for education and solid public policy that can move Wisconsin forward."

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