

School officials concerned

By Jennifer Fetterley Hometown News Group | Posted: Wednesday, May 8, 2013 10:10 am

School administrators told legislators last week that public education in Wisconsin is hurting and they want something done about it.

Gov. Scott Walker's proposed 2013-15 biennial budget calls for no increase in revenue caps, minimal increases (1 percent) in state aid and expansion of the voucher and charter school programs.

School officials say the proposed budget, if passed, would devastate districts.

"Every department has been cut, every piece of our budget has been cut. We have to stop the bleeding," River Valley School District Superintendent Jamie Benson told legislators at the April 23 South Central School Leaders' Summit in Sauk City.

School leaders from Baraboo, Lodi, Portage, Pardeeville, Poynette, Reedsburg, River Valley, Sauk Prairie, Wisconsin Dells and Wisconsin Heights, echoed the same sentiment and also protested the growth in voucher and charter school because it's disproportionately funded compared with overall student population.

While staff and operational budgets have been cut over the last couple of years, administrators say class sizes have increased and facilities are falling in disrepair because of reductions in state aid, all when the state is mandating new testing and curriculums.

School officials said it's a near impossible task.

"I don't understand how this is going to happen. I am given less, given less staff to do it and at the same time being told that we have to do more," said Lodi School District superintendent Chuck Pursell.

Lodi, a rural school district with declining enrollment, has cut \$2.2 million over the last two years and is looking at an estimated \$480,000-\$750,000 deficit for the 2013-14 school year, depending on what state budget is approved.

In response to the Walker proposal, Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon) and Sen. Mike Ellis (R-Neenah) have proposed a plan that would call for \$150 per pupil increase.

School officials believe even the proposed increase isn't enough, but would at least allow districts to make fewer budget cuts. School revenue limits have declined over the last four years, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

"The \$150 proposed increase would change our numbers from red to black in staff and programming but we will still have a huge gap in facilities," Poynette District Administrator Matthew Shappell said. "We protect our staff and programs but when the roof leaks it's hard for our children to learn."

School officials also took issue at losing money with the expansion of charter and voucher schools

funding.

Walker's budget proposal calls for voucher expansion in low performing school districts in Beloit, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Kenosha, Madison, Sheboygan, Superior, Waukesha and West Allis, joining the already existing programs in Milwaukee and Racine. Per-pupil voucher payments are estimated at \$7,856 for the 2014-15 school year, with 62 percent of the cost paid by the state and 38 percent levied by the district.

Walker's budget proposal calls for a total net school aid increase of \$73 million for voucher schools and \$23 million for independent charters, which school officials call disproportionate.

There are 864,000 students enrolled in public schools, 30,000 voucher students and 10,500 enrolled in independent charter schools, according to DPI. There are also no revenue limits restriction for independent charter and voucher schools, so those schools can spend whatever is allocated. DPI officials said expanding vouchers would increase property taxes while diverting resources from public education.

School officials asked the legislators to not extend voucher/charter funding and take it out of the budget bill, along with the proposal to create a state charter authorizing board that would take over local control and be funded through a statewide cut to general school aids.

Others urged legislators to reform the school finance formula, which is now currently connected with property taxes.

"You should discuss, as soon as possible, how to change the state school funding formula to eliminate our current system that continues to create winners and losers and negatively impacts school districts across the state," said Lodi School Board president Sue Miller, as the audience of more than 100 erupted into applause.

Rep. Fred Clark (D-Sauk City), Sen. Jon Erpenbach (D-Middleton), Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), Sen. Schultz (R-Richland Center) and Rep. Keith Ripp (R-Lodi) listened but were unable to offer any clear-cut solutions other than the \$150 per pupil increase proposal that was on the table.

Clark said there had to be "political will" to change the public education funding formula and said it will take bi-partisan effort to find a solution.

Erpenbach urged school officials to talk to the governor and lawmakers about their predicament.

"You have to talk to the governor. I don't like vouchers. I don't think schools need competition; they need our support. We need to take schools off the property tax roll and use sales taxes," Erpenbach said.

He said school districts are operating in an antiquated system with the current school calendar and that districts should share services and staff.

Other legislators cast doubt on the voucher/charter school expansion.

"A lot of people want choice, but how are we going to pay for it?" Ripp said. "I don't think we can afford to pay for both right now."

Olsen said finding a lasting solution will be challenging.

"In this budget, we were sure that the Governor would put more money in for school," Olsen said.

"Rep. Ellis and I had to get out in front of it. We live in a political world and have to fund this," Olsen said. "We have serious, serious challenges in our state, we have different challenges than we have ever had before and it will test our mettle like it has never been tested before."