

State Democrats seek to pump money back into schools

By **Tim Damos, News Republic** | Posted: Wednesday, March 7, 2012 8:26 pm

As Republican-backed education reforms related to early reading and teacher effectiveness make their way toward Gov. Scott Walker's desk, Democrats say many districts have a more immediate problem: Cash.

For the second time, Democrats have put forward an initiative to modify the way public schools are funded that would provide more than \$350 million to schools statewide.

The so-called Save Our Schools initiative, introduced Tuesday by Representatives Fred Clark, D-Baraboo, and Sondy Pope-Roberts, D-Middleton, would guarantee schools at least \$3,000 per student in general aid, and ensure that no school receives a funding decrease.

It's nearly identical to a proposal Democrats put forth last spring as Republicans moved forward with plans to slash more than \$800 million from public school aid. The bill incorporates changes to school funding proposed by Superintendent Tony Evers in 2010.

Supporters say districts around the state are facing shortfalls this school year. That includes the Sauk Prairie School District, where the board voted to close a school to patch a budget hole.

The bill would boost funding for 360 districts and provide the same level of funding for 64 districts, according to the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau. Clark introduced the proposal the day the Republican-controlled Assembly was slated to take up Republican-backed education reforms.

Clark said his bill restores critical funding to struggling public schools in a way that is fair and affordable.

"Throughout the last year I've had parents, teachers and school board members ask me how it is possible this legislature could have provided billions of dollars in tax breaks to out-of-state corporations, while making historic cuts in funding to our public schools," he said. "This proposal represents our commitment to put families and our children first, and I believe it is the best investment we could make in our future."

The legislation would reduce charter school vouchers by 3.5 percent and allow districts to increase levy limits next school year.

Under the bill, the Baraboo School District's state aid would increase from \$17 million to \$18.2 million. The district saw a decrease of about \$1.7 million in state aid this school year because of Republican-backed cuts to public education funding.

But Republicans said the controversial changes to collective bargaining rules they enacted allowed districts to compensate for reduced state funding with employee cost savings on health insurance and retirement benefits. The Baraboo district eliminated about \$1.5 million in expenses because of those changes, which required employees to pay a greater share of their benefits.

Sen. Luther Olsen, R-Ripon, who chairs the Senate Committee on Education, said the state cannot afford a \$350 million injection into public schools right now.

"While I am sensitive to the funding shortages many districts are experiencing, the state is unfortunately not in a financial position to consider making an outlay of this size," Olsen said.

Olsen sponsored an education reform bill the Senate passed Tuesday that would require kindergarten screening exams and teacher evaluations based partly on test scores as part of an initiative to improve student reading.

The proposal is one of Walker's top priorities but has drawn criticism from Democrats and state Superintendent Tony Evers. They have complained the plan does not bring charter schools and private voucher schools into the new accountability system. Walker and Republican bill sponsors say those changes weren't ready.

The Assembly planned to vote on the reform bill Tuesday. But at about 1:30 a.m. early Wednesday morning Republican leaders decided instead to adjourn and take up a number of unfinished bills next week.

Lodi District Administrator Chuck Pursell, who spoke Tuesday during a press conference about Clark's bill, said the Republican reforms hold public schools to a higher standard than private and charter schools.

"I don't believe anyone in this state — the Legislature, the governor, or a public servant — would be happy ... if our beloved Packers had to play by a different set of rules than every other team in the National Football League," Pursell said. "But that's seemingly what we're beginning to set up here in this state — a competition on the basis that one team can kick a field goal and get three points, and another team can kick a field goal and get nothing."

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