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Editorial: OK, let's talk school funding formula

Wisconsin Superintendent of Public School Tony Evers deserves credit for broaching the subject of state funding for schools.

Evers, who was elected in 2009 to head the agency that deals with policy issues involving the state's 400 public school districts, is calling his plan "Fair Funding for Our Future."

Whether state lawmakers, who must OK any changes in the funding formula and local school officials, who will have to deal with any changes, consider Evers' plan "fair" is anybody's guess right now. Most are playing things pretty close to the vest.

In fact, there is little indication at this point how the major players in the gubernatorial race — Democrat Tom Barrett and Republicans Scott Walker and Mark Neumann — feel since the news releases from their respective camps pretty much say only that they're happy to see someone proposing an overhaul.

It may not be as "hot" an issue as proposing changes in Social Security — the so-called third rail of national politics — but it is close.

Evers' plan recognizes that the current system is in need of repair. It is indeed a significant overhaul of the system, although it is short on some details for now. And, the gubernatorial hopefuls are correct that now would be a good time to talk about state funding for local education.

He proposes a funding formula that shifts nearly \$900 million in tax relief — the Property Tax Levy Credit that shows up on everyone's property tax bill — over to the schools themselves.

This is, by far, the most significant aspect of Evers' plan and is likely to be the most controversial.

While Evers maintains this won't increase overall property taxes statewide, it is still a large shifting of money from taxpayers to schools. Created in 1996, the tax credit is popular because it is a direct reduction in what people have to shell out each year in taxes.

To us, this sounds a lot like a tax increase.

Less controversial are Evers' ideas to use a school district's relative wealth in determining its level of funding. Evers would also give school districts a better idea what each could expect in state aid from year to year. He also wants to help mostly rural districts with transportation costs.

Clearly, now is as good a time as any to revamp the funding formula.

The state, which is supposed to be funding two-thirds of the cost of local education, has slipped well below that figure in recent years. Drastic changes in school funding projects have forced local districts to either raise property taxes to the maximum allowed, or slash budget — in some cases, such as Sheboygan, do both.

Since nearly everyone agrees that the current state aid system is broke, a frank and open discussion of the possible fixes, should be a priority for all.