



Wisconsin school funding proposal praised

Under Evers' reform, Green Bay district would get extra \$1.7M

By Patti Zarling •
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Local educators applaud a new plan to retool the way the state helps pay for schools, but some warn changes are a long way from coming to pass.

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Wisconsin school superintendent Tony Evers stopped at Chappell Elementary School in Green Bay on Tuesday to tout his Fair Funding for our Future plan. It was one of many recent visits he's made around the state to promote his proposal.

"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. "Our current school finance system is broken. We can do better. We must do better."

One part of the plan would shift school property tax credits to the general school aid formula.

This would allow school districts to decrease their property tax levies and reduce the amount they need to collect from taxpayers.

If the plan were in place now, for example, the Green Bay School District would see an additional \$1.7 million in state aids and could reduce its tax levy. Thus, the owner of a home valued at \$100,000 in the Green Bay district would see a tax increase of \$6 this year over last, compared with the \$27 increase the district projects now. But taxpayers also wouldn't see a property tax credit, which the state now distributes to municipalities to pass on to property owners.

The Fair Funding proposal would, in part:

- Guarantee a minimum of \$3,000 in state funding for every students.
- Consider the number of students living in poverty in school districts and provide 20 percent in additional aid to district for each student that qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.
- Establish predictable growth in state aids of 2 percent.
- Maintain current property tax levy limits.
- Redirect school tax levy credits into general school aids.
- Consolidate certain categorical aids to focus on areas of greatest need.
- Make formula changes that strengthen rural districts or those facing declining enrollment. The new formula would increase state aids for most school districts and includes a "hold harmless" clause for districts that would see a loss, Evers said. The Department of Public Instruction estimates the changes would cost the state an additional \$400 million over two years. Evers said he plans to discuss the proposal with Gov.-elect Scott Walker soon. Walker, a Republican, was elected governor in November and will replace Democrat Gov. Jim Doyle when he steps down in January. Walker "seems to be in agreement that the system is broken," Evers said. "We do intend to meet with him. I don't want to wait until the Legislature is back in session." Some local school administrators say they back Evers'

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eliminates the number of losers and eliminates any decreases in state aids." Changes that take into account students living in poverty help the urban district, he said. Also, shifting focus of categorical aids to things like special education likely would be good for Green Bay. "I think he's got some good ideas," Wagner said. "We'll see how it goes." Most school districts would see increases up to 5 percent, with most Door County schools receiving 10 to 20 percent in additional aid. Ashwaubenon and Howard-Suamico school districts would have no change under the formula. The West De Pere School District would see a 7.7 percent increase in state aid. "I firmly believe Tony Evers' proposal is a good one," said West De Pere Superintendent John Zegers. "He's talked to a lot of people and groups and put a lot of thought into it." Zegers said a key part of the plan is maintaining a \$200 per student revenue-limit increase. The amount had been \$275 per student a few years ago, and school administrators fear state lawmakers could impose steeper limits in the future. The revenue limit is meant to control property tax levies. "That part is critical," Zegers said. "We need that revenue to be maintained. If it's cut, education suffers, and we believe it's important to maintain quality education for our kids." Evers is a long way from getting it passed. But I was encouraged he and Walker are getting together. I'm hopeful something will happen. De Pere Superintendent Ben Villarruel is taking a wait-and-see approach. "It's such a complex issue, and where we start and where we end up usually are not the same thing," he said. "I applaud Evers' efforts. I'm sure the new governor and Legislature will do their best to react. There are a lot of

challenges. "What do you think about Evers' proposal? Green Bay Press-Gazette reporter Patti Zarling will host a live online chat at 11 a.m. Wednesday to discuss the issue.

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