



Editorial: Evers' school-funding plan is only a start

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The Wisconsin proposal to fund state public schools unveiled last week by Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers is a bold plan that seeks to rectify disparities in the current formula.

Because it calls for a massive shift of money from school tax credits for property owners and a commitment from the state Legislature to spend more money on schools, Evers plan — which he is calling Fair Funding for Our Schools — faces a rocky road.

We give Evers credit for proposing changes in how state school aid is distributed because for too long funding has been based mostly on a school district's property values and less on actual poverty in the district. By using the number of school children eligible for free or reduced-cost school lunches — an indication of poverty — more aid would go to districts with the poorest students.

One of the problems we see, however, is the shifting of money from the school tax credit to direct school funding.

Now, every property owner in the state sees a credit on his or her property tax bill, which reduces the amount of school taxes paid. Evers would shift this money, about \$900 million, to school districts.

Even though this money is distributed as a tax credit, the state counts the \$900 million as part of its commitment to school funding. But as Evers notes, school districts have to levy taxes on property to get this money to spend it on students.

Evers use of the tax credit for direct aid, should mean that school districts will have to raise less from the property tax levy and maintains by shifting the money there would not be an increase in school tax levies.

But convincing property owners to give up a tax credit for an assumption that their property taxes would go down is a hard sell.

Evers also wants the Legislature to raise the state's commitment to schools by 2 percent, or \$93 million in the next budget. This would be followed by a

guaranteed 4 percent increase in 2012-13 — another \$319 million.

But since the state is short of money already, this increase in funding would have to come out of the pockets of taxpayers in one way or another.

Critics say Evers' plan just throws more money at school districts in the hope that greater spending will result in a better education.

If spending more money on education were the answer, Milwaukee Public Schools would be performing much better because the district's per-student spending is among the highest in the state. But districts that spend far less money on each student, perform much better when standardized test scores are compared.

We don't disagree that the formula for dividing up state tax dollars on education needs an overhaul. Evers' proposal, however, shouldn't be viewed as the only answer.

It's a start, but there needs to be greater focus on finding educational improvements that don't involve just spending more money.

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