



Wisconsin school aid change has support among Appleton officials

By Kathy Walsh Nufer • Post-Crescent staff writer • December 20, 2010

APPLETON — Appleton school officials say a new plan to revamp the way the state helps finance public schools would give them a much needed boost.

State aid to schools is the single largest expense in the state budget, accounting for more than 37 percent of the total. The formula that determines how much money each district gets is largely regarded by education leaders, politicians and others as broken.

Additional information

These links will open in a new window:

- ◆ [Kimberly can't find its time capsule](#)
- ◆ [Sign up for news, weather and sports text alerts.](#)

State school Supt. Tony Evers unveiled his funding plan last month as a way to fix the state funding formula.

The "Fair Funding for our Future" plan would cost the state an estimated \$400 million more over two years and use that money to pay a base of \$3,000 for every child in every school system.

If Evers' school finance reform proposal was adopted in the state's 2011-13 budget cycle, Appleton would see an increase in state equalization aid, and Appleton taxpayers a reduction in their school tax levy.

"It would be a considerable improvement for the school district and Appleton taxpayers," Supt. Lee Allinger said. "If this had been in place this year it would have wiped out any need to increase property

taxes."

"Instead of our levy being \$65.6 million, it would have been \$49.8 million," said Don Hietpas, the school district's chief financial officer, "and even if you take into account the almost \$9.7 million that went into levy credits, we still would have been able to drop our taxes. The absolute bottom line is that had this plan been in place, Appleton school district property tax payers would have paid almost \$6.2 million less in property taxes for this school year."

Appleton's potential increased state equalization aid, which is based on the level of funding available to Wisconsin K-12 public schools, would have increased from the \$81,704,165 certified by the state Department of Public Instruction in October to \$97,559,024 under the plan, he said.

Hietpas noted that the change would not directly increase school spending, but it would have reduced the impact felt by district taxpayers since revenue caps would still be in effect.

Evers' proposal recognizes the differences in districts, taking into account those, like Appleton, with a large percentage of low-income students and English Language Learners (ELL), Allinger said.

Hietpas said he sees a lot to like in the plan when he laid it out for school board members recently.

"I've been around school funding for 20 years, 10 years as a board member and nine in the business department, and this is the best piece of work I've seen around school funding," he said. "It creates a more transparent and honest school tax system for

Advertisement

(We do.)

WATCH THE VIDEO

Sam, Baby Boomer

THE POST-CRESCENT
postcrescent.com

in partnership with
YAHOO!

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



local taxpayers by redirecting the school levy tax credit into general school aids."

It would provide a significant amount of property tax relief for most districts because it equalizes rather than disequalizes, he said. "The current tax levy credit is disequalizing. It goes to property rich districts that don't need it."

Hietpas said he expects the proposal to be the topic of a lot more discussion and negotiation at the state level.

"I'm pleased that our state school superintendent is taking a serious swing at the bat on this," said Dr. John Mielke, who chairs the Appleton school board's business services panel, acknowledging Evers is trying to simplify a complex issue and make funding more predictable and consistent.

The plan, as proposed, would not take effect until the 2012-13 fiscal year, but would bring relief to a district that has seen the property tax levy increase by 18.3 percent over the previous two years despite only a 3.6 percent increase in general fund spending during that period, Hietpas said.

School board member Jeff Knezel is not too optimistic about the new proposal.

"I am pleased Tony Evers is being proactive in approaching this funding issue," he said. "But we ought to be realistic. The state is in deep, deep debt. Where is that money going to come from?"

Knezel said that until the state climbs out of its financial hole, "I don't see a lot of legislators interested in doing this."

In the meantime, Appleton has begun preparing various scenarios to deal with its current budget situation, said Allinger. Those scenarios will be rolled out at the board's next business service meeting Jan. 12.

Kathy Walsh Nufer: 920-993-1000, ext. 290, or knufer@postcrescent.com

Advertisement

(We do.)

WATCH THE VIDEO

Sam, Baby Boomer

THE POST-CRESCENT
postcrescent.com

In partnership with
YAHOO!

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™