

## Nerison joins 13 other rural GOP lawmakers in seeking more school aid



9 HOURS AGO • BY PATRICK B. ANDERSON  
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A group of rural Republicans have called for an increase to public school funding, despite recommendations from Gov. Scott Walker to keep revenues flat for another two years.

“A lot of the rural schools are more conservative in their spending,” said Rep. Lee Nerison, a Westby Republican. “When they do get the cuts it hurts a little more.”

He and 13 other GOP Assembly members signed an open letter to Sen. Alberta Darling,

R-River Falls, and Rep. John Nygren, R-Marinette, the co-chairs of the budget-crafting Joint Finance Committee, imploring the committee leaders to provide more money to local schools.

“Collectively, we have heard from parents and schools in our districts that the budget proposal should provide more funding for public schools. We’re sure you have heard similar comments,” the letter said. “We all know that Wisconsin has a

strong history of quality education for our youth. To keep that tradition, we agree that the public schools in our districts would benefit from an increase in K-12 funding and an increase in revenue limits.”

Walker’s budget proposal calls for more state aid to school districts but would freeze the cap on the total amount of money school districts can raise between aid and property taxes. Flat revenue limits turn any state aid increase into nothing more than local property tax relief, said Robert Knadle, superintendent for the Viroqua School District.

Viroqua schools are in Nerison’s district.

“You can hand us dollars, but without a revenue limit increase, you know, you can’t increase your spending,” Knadle said.

School districts could be forced to cut teachers and classes unless there is an increase in revenue — and not just an increase in aid, said Randy Nelson, superintendent for the La Crosse School District.

Public schools also face Wisconsin's continued education reforms, including stricter classroom standards, new student assessments and new evaluations for teachers.

"We've got new standards," Nelson said. "We've got new assessments coming. There are some real needs for materials, for resources, to support that."

Allowing schools to raise more money shouldn't be a partisan issue, said Troy Gunderson, superintendent for the West Salem School District. "In order to provide resources for these kids, it just costs money."

Nerison didn't view the letter as departing from a major GOP stance.

"I don't know if it's really a break," he said. "Ever since the budget came out there's been Republican legislators questioning it. When you get the budget from the governor, it's kind of a work in progress."

He said he sought input from the vast majority of school districts in his district on the issue, including officials at Viroqua public schools. Nerison's signature on the letter proves the lawmaker's commitment to public education, said Knadle, the superintendent.

"I'm very pleased that he followed through with this," Knadle said. "He stated to us that he values public education, and this is very good example of that."

Sen. Jennifer Shilling of La Crosse, the ranking Democrat on the Joint Finance Committee, weighed in on the letter via email.

"While short on details, I appreciate the letter that was sent by a few of the Republican representatives," she said. But her response was tinged with skepticism.

"While I hope this is a sign that there will be some bipartisan support to restore the cuts to our public schools, there are a growing number of Republican legislators who have said the only way they will vote for the budget is if the private voucher school expansion is included," she said.