

Lawmakers unite behind call for more school funds

By Julian Emerson Leader-Telegram staff | Posted: Monday, May 13, 2013 11:51 pm

It's not often Wisconsin Democratic and Republican lawmakers agree these days, but Chippewa Valley legislators from both parties are seeking more money for the state's public schools.

Gov. Scott Walker's 2013-15 proposed state budget calls for potentially allocating additional money to public schools without raising spending limits for those school districts. That action would reduce property taxes to support schools but wouldn't allow districts to spend more to stave off budget cuts.

Democratic representatives have said allowing school districts to raise spending limits is necessary to retain educational quality. Last week Chippewa Valley Republican legislators agreed. In a May 7 letter, Assembly Republicans from this part of the state including Warren Petryk, Tom Larson, Kathy Bernier, John Murtha and Mary Williams urged party leaders to include more money for schools in the state budget.

"They're asking for a little bit of help, and we believe they should have that," Bernier, R-Lake Hallie, said in reference to school districts.

Chris Danou, D-Trempealeau, said this region's many smaller school districts would be especially hard-hit by further budget reductions that are likely with a spending limit exemption.

"Those smaller districts, the Pepins and Gilmantons of the world, if you lose one teacher, you could lose your 10th-grade math program or your eighth-grade English program," he said. "They don't have the room for any more cutbacks. They're squeezed down to just providing the core curriculum."

Bernier agreed, saying many schools in the 68th Assembly District she represents have reduced salaries, benefits and other spending measures and don't have much budget wiggle room.

"We have concerns with a number of schools in our district that will have a great deal of difficulty maintaining what they need to do with kids (without raising spending limits)," she said.

School districts with lower per-pupil spending should benefit more from a cap boost than those with higher expenditures, she said.

Bernier said she is uncertain whether the request to increase spending limits for schools will make it through the Republican-controlled Legislature.

"I've been told (the) Joint Finance (Committee) is going to alter the governor's proposal," she said. "I just don't know yet what that means."

Republicans and Democrats remain divided about another education-related initiative in the governor's proposed budget: private school vouchers. The budget includes \$94 million for parents to send their children to private schools. While Bernier said she understands the need for providing students with additional educational choices, state Rep. Dana Wachs, D-Eau Claire, said using public dollars for private schools doesn't make sense given that private schools don't face the same accountability

standards as their public school counterparts.

Emerson can be reached at 715-830-5911, 800-236-7077 or julian.emerson@ecpc.com.