

# Keep Speaking Up for Education

**Advocacy work continues as school leaders push to restore school funding**

*Dan Rossmiller*

**A**s you read this, we've entered the month of April. The Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance has completed its series of four public hearings on the proposed 2015-17 state budget and is poised to begin voting. This is a crucial period as those committee votes may reshape the proposed budget significantly.

In general, school leaders have done a good job testifying at the hearings, adopting resolutions, sending letters and speaking up to inform the public and their legislators about the impact the proposed budget would have on their districts. That important work needs to continue throughout the budget process.

## ■ Tell Your Story

Dollars are tight in this budget and there are a number of competing priorities vying for additional funding. For public schools to move to the head of the list and remain there, school leaders need to tell compelling stories about how opportunities for students will be affected by the proposed funding cuts and not rely solely on data and figures.

You know best how to tell the particular stories that reflect your district's situation. You might explain how larger class sizes will make it harder for struggling learners to get the amount of one-on-one teacher attention and extra help they need to succeed; or explain

how the cuts may make it difficult for you to expand your STEM programs or maintain your gifted and talented programs and what impact this will have on students.

Before lawmakers can be expected to begin fashioning solutions to problems like the loss of \$150 per-pupil in every district in the state next year and a two-year freeze on school district revenues, they have to be educated on what problems that combination of fiscal constraints will cause for you and your district.

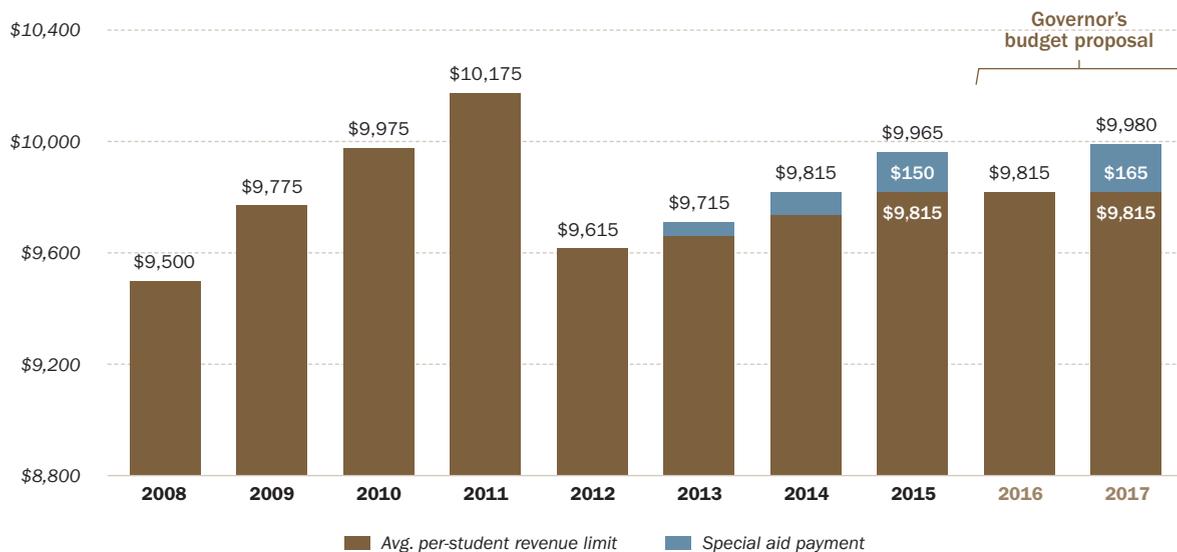
## ■ State Budget Update

At this stage, the proposed 2015-17 budget is about three weeks ahead of schedule compared to the typical deliberations over previous state budget proposals. The Joint Finance Committee likely will start taking votes in early April. But there still is time for you to communicate with your legislators. Votes in the Joint Finance Committee on school funding typically come toward the end of the committee's deliberations. Following those votes, the budget goes to each house of the Legislature



**Jim Bowman**, school board member from the Appleton Area School District, testifies before the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee in Brillion.

## Per-Student Revenues for an “Average” School District



Source: Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance (WISATA)

where some additional, although likely only minor, changes will be made.

If and when proposals to address schools' fiscal situation surface, it will be important for school leaders to express their support and gratitude for those proposals.

We don't know yet how far those proposals will be able to go in addressing the situation. School board members who attended the WASB's Day at the Capitol heard lawmakers indicate that they want to do something to help schools. Many heard their legislators say they are willing to commit to fix the \$150 cut in per-pupil aid if estimates of state revenues expected in late April or early May show greater than anticipated growth. While that is a wonderful first step, it leaves unanswered the question: "What happens if hoped-for state revenue growth does not materialize?"

So we have to keep pressing the issues that we care about. If we allow lawmakers the out of saying, "I'm sorry, but revenues just aren't as large

as we had hoped they might be," we will have accomplished little for our schools.

There is money in the proposed budget that could be used to increase direct funding for schools. For example, there is money dedicated to providing additional property tax credits, about \$211 million in total. The job will be convincing lawmakers that this money would be better spent as an investment in our children's education than in providing a \$5 per-year reduction in the typical homeowner's property tax bill. And, if those late revenue re-estimates should predict that additional state funds will be available, so much the better.

School leaders are doing a good job so far. We need to continue those efforts through the end of the budget writing process, which is likely to last another two to three months. The WASB and its government relations team are here to help you.

### ■ School Accountability

One of the issues lawmakers had set

as a priority as the legislative session began was school accountability. As of this writing, the two houses seem to be quite a ways apart in their preferred approach to this issue.

The Senate position, which the WASB has favored, is to maintain current law. All publicly funded students, including voucher students, would continue to take the same state assessment, and the current narrative descriptions of school performance would be maintained without specifying any particular sanctions for low-performance.

The Assembly position is to demand sanctions that would take away local school boards' authority over low-performing schools, allow schools to select from a variety of student assessments to measure student performance for accountability purposes, and to assign letter grades to schools on state report cards (along with narrative descriptions). The latest version of the Assembly accountability bill also included a provision where the school board would cede authority to the

district administrator to unilaterally control low-performing schools and potentially rewrite board policies.

The governor also put forth an accountability proposal in his proposed state budget. That plan calls for assigning letter grades to schools and allowing private voucher schools to select from a variety of student assessments to measure performance for accountability purposes, but would not impose sanctions. The governor's proposal would also require the DPI, when calculating school report card scores, to adjust the weight given to the measures of pupil achievement and pupil growth in reading and mathematics based on the number of economically disadvantaged pupils enrolled in the school or school district. (The latest Assembly version

also incorporates this requirement.)

Unless an agreement can be worked out between the houses to resolve these differences through separate legislation, it appears likely that the whole question of accountability will either be worked out through the budget process or not at all.

Complicating matters is that the state appears headed toward discontinuing the use of the Smarter Balanced Exam (a/k/a Badger Exam) as the state assessment in grades three through eight after this year. The governor recommends scrapping the test after this year as part of his proposed budget.

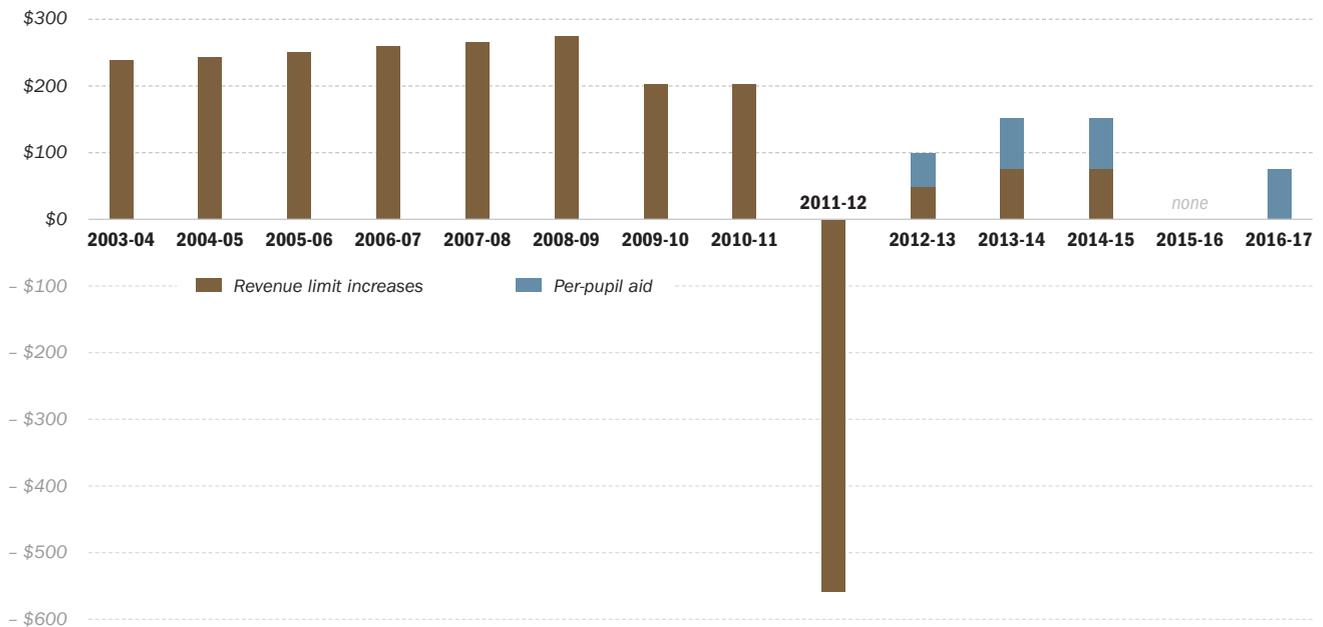
This test, an online assessment, which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards, has encountered both political opposition and

technical glitches in addition to being more expensive to administer than anticipated. This means students will be assessed using a different test in 2015-16, which may make measuring student growth, a key component of the report card score, more difficult and less reliable.

Given the many changes occurring to testing and academic standards, it seems wise to delay making "high-stakes" decisions, including sanctioning schools. The WASB supports the Senate version of accountability (Senate Bill 1), which is less intrusive and does not call for sanctions. We encourage members to support the Senate version as well. ■

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### Per-Pupil Revenue Limit & Per-Pupil Aid



Source: Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance (WISTAX)