

GOP Increases Majorities

Walker calls for education reform agenda



As a result of the November 4 election, Gov. Scott Walker won reelection and Republicans strengthened their control of both houses of the Wisconsin Legislature. The GOP increased its margin by three seats in the state Assembly and will hold a 63-36 majority when the new legislative session commences in January. In the state Senate, Republicans increased their margin by one seat and will hold a 19-14 advantage.

One key priority for Republican lawmakers and the governor is enacting a school accountability measure. A proposal to bring private voucher schools that enroll students who receive taxpayer-subsidized tuition payments into a state accountability system failed last spring.

Versions of that earlier bill called for sanctions on public and private voucher schools in which student academic performance fails to meet certain standards; however, lawmakers failed to reach consensus on the specific sanctions to be imposed. Lawmakers also disagreed on whether to allow private voucher school students who receive taxpayer-funded tuition subsidies to take a different test than those in public schools, a feature voucher proponents sought. Currently, private school students receiving taxpay-

er-funded tuition subsidies must take the same state assessments as students in public schools.

■ Walker wants Education Reform Package

Gov. Walker says he wants an accountability bill passed early next year. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) indicates it will be one of the first things the new Legislature tackles and says he wants accountability measures passed ahead of any expansions of taxpayer-funded tuition subsidies.

The statewide program that provides taxpayer subsidies to pay tuition at private schools is currently capped at 1,000 students. However, Gov. Walker and Republican leaders have said they want to expand or even do away with that lid. Vos, in a television interview, also said he would like to eliminate family income thresholds in that (voucher) program, and expand open enrollment to any school (public or private) participating in state testing.

Gov. Walker has called for the “repeal” of the Common Core State Standards and their replacement with “standards that are set by people here in Wisconsin, not by people outside of the state.” Shortly after his re-election Gov. Walker noted, “One of the things I mentioned throughout the campaign that I wanted to do early on is an

overall education reform package.”

■ Evers Releases Budget Request

Those education policy priorities contrast sharply with those reflected in the budget proposal submitted recently by State Superintendent Tony Evers.

The centerpiece of Evers’ proposal is a school funding formula reform plan he calls “Fair Funding for Our Future” that would increase public school funding by \$613 million over the next two years.

The plan would increase state school aid by 2.6 percent in the 2015-16 school year and 4.7 percent in 2016-17, with the latter increase funded by channeling \$897.4 million in state dollars currently distributed through a pair of property tax credits — the School Levy Tax Credit and the First Dollar Credit — into general equalization aids beginning with 2016-17 state aid payments.

Evers’ plan would guarantee a minimum amount of state funding (\$3,000) for every student and would incorporate a poverty factor into the aid formula to give extra weight (30 percent) to students from low-income families.

Evers’ proposal would also adjust per-pupil revenue limits by \$200 in the first year and \$204 in the second year, allowing increases of approxi-

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mately 2 percent annually in revenues for the average school district, according to the DPI.

The DPI budget request also calls for more spending for students with disabilities, safety programs, and for districts with English language learners.

Evers' proposal will be considered by the governor for possible inclusion in the 2015-17 state budget bill, which must be approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor to go into law.

■ **Lawmakers Criticize Evers' Plan**

Evers has twice before submitted his "Fair Funding for Our Future" proposal as part of the DPI's budget request only to see the governor and GOP lawmakers ignore it in the

budget plans they advanced.

Indeed, two top Assembly Republican leaders were quick to criticize Evers' plan, particularly its call for a \$613 million increase in school aids.

Vos and Joint Finance Committee Co-chair John Nygren (R-Marinette) say they plan to move ahead with their own agenda, which calls for "more efficient use of taxpayer dollars in education, by focusing resources in the classroom.

"We have a responsibility to provide a great education to every child in Wisconsin and protect the interests of the taxpayer," they said. "It is unfortunate that DPI doesn't put more of an emphasis on the latter."

State Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), chair of the Senate Education Committee, said he does not think there is any appetite among lawmakers for changing the

school funding formula in the next two years.

With a bigger, more conservative Republican majority in both houses, Sen. Olsen suggested the strongest appetite is going to be for cutting property taxes and expanding private school vouchers. But he said that if public schools didn't get any increase in funding, the state would be going backward.

"Labor costs go up and the costs of operating the business of schools go up every year," he said.

Gov. Walker and newly elected lawmakers will be sworn in Jan. 5. The Legislature will begin its session that month, with a State of the State address sometime in late January and the budget speech following shortly after. State budget hearings and debate are expected to begin in earnest in March. ■



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