

State Budget Heads for Home Stretch

Continued Advocacy Still Needed

School leaders and public school advocates have done a terrific job to date of communicating a consistent message regarding the state budget. This effort needs to continue through the month of June if we are to be successful in improving the budget introduced by the governor.

From testimony offered to the Joint Finance Committee at its four statewide budget hearings to the compelling stories of how the proposed state budget will impact local school districts given at local legislative forums, listening sessions and private meetings with legislators, school board members, district administrators and concerned parents have emphasized the priority issues the WASB has identified:

- **INCREASING revenue limits** (by **SUPPORTING** the “Ellis-Olsen” proposal) to provide a revenue limit increase of at least \$200 per pupil. *Sen. Ellis has raised his target from \$150 to \$200 per pupil.*
- **REMOVING from the budget** voucher expansion and creation of vouchers for special needs students; and
- **REMOVING from the budget** the creation of an independent charter school board, as well as other provisions on charter schools that will take away local control from locally elected school board members.

Thank you.

These efforts are making a definite impact, but they must continue until the budget debate is completed and the budget bill is signed into law by the governor.

As of the time of this writing, the budget bill remains in the Joint Committee on Finance. From there it will go to the state Assembly — most likely in early June — and then to the state Senate. If necessary, a Conference Committee will meet to iron out any differences between the two houses before the bill goes to the governor. The bill must pass both houses in identical form to get to the governor.

To date, the Joint Finance Committee has mostly voted on non-controversial items so there is little news to report; however, the pace is about to pick up dramatically. The committee will vote on some more weighty issues in late-May. Included among these will be school funding, voucher expansion and expansion of independent charter schools, and other issues affecting K-12 education.

Several recent developments will shape budget deliberations. The first and most significant is the release of



new, more robust estimates of state revenue growth by the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

The new forecast indicates the state will take in \$575 million more in general purpose revenue through mid-2015 than previously estimated. That amount includes an additional \$215 million in the current 2012-13 fiscal year followed by an extra \$180 million in 2013-14 and another \$180 million in 2014-15.

By law, half of the additional revenue in the current fiscal year, or \$107.5 million — half the \$215 million — will be deposited to the state’s budget stabilization (“rainy day”) fund for 2012-13. The other \$107.5 million of additional tax collections will be available for expenditure during the remainder of this year. If not spent, it will increase the estimated 2013-14 beginning general fund balance.

The new estimates suggest there is revenue available to increase both state aid and revenue limits above the levels proposed by the governor. (The governor proposed increasing

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state general aid by 1 percent per year but would freeze revenue limits for two years.)

On the heels of new estimates, Assembly GOP members of the Joint Finance Committee called for increasing funding for K-12 education by \$100 per pupil per year — above what the governor had proposed, as well as channeling more money into tax relief.

On the Senate side, Senate President Mike Ellis (R-Neenah), the architect of a prior plan to increase per-pupil revenue limits by \$150 in each year of the biennium, moved his target to \$200 per-pupil in light of the new estimates. The WASB has publicly expressed support for Sen. Ellis' new proposal for a \$200 per-pupil revenue limit adjustment.

The WASB remains steadfast in its opposition to the inclusion of a number of policy items in the budget bill — including expansion of the private school voucher program, the creation of special needs vouchers and a state independent charter school board, and other changes to charter school laws that would strip local school boards of their oversight authority with respect to charter schools. The WASB urges that these items be removed from the budget bill and debated separately.

Another set of developments relate to voucher expansion. Recently, it was revealed that the federal Department of Justice (DOJ) wrote a directive informing the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) it must take steps

to ensure voucher schools do not discriminate against students with disabilities. This could change the landscape for voucher expansion in Wisconsin.

The directive cited the complaints of advocacy groups for children with disabilities, who filed a federal lawsuit in June 2011 which claimed just 1.6 percent of the 21,000 students enrolled at the time in private voucher schools had special education service plans, compared with 20 percent of students in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

includes an expansion of voucher programs. Another, somewhat larger group of GOP state Senators is standing strong against voucher expansion, giving us hope and making it all the more important that school leaders continue to contact lawmakers to urge removal of voucher expansion from the budget.

■ Continue Contacting Your Legislators

To be successful in this budget battle, your school board and

administrators must continue to contact legislators and continue to tell your district's story. One good way to do this is to prepare a one-page description of how the proposed state budget will impact your district. But don't just cite numbers, dollars and cents and statistics. Try to "humanize" your

anticipated budget cuts by putting them in human terms — i.e., how the program and staff cuts will specifically affect students and their opportunities. Remember: numbers are good, but stories have staying power. Lawmakers will remember the stories you tell.

Don't be afraid to enlist others to help you tell your district's story. Lawmakers expect to hear from school board members and administrators. If you invite and encourage others to tell your story (especially parents, students, and community leaders) it can pay surprising dividends and help lawmakers remember your message. ■

NEW STATE BUDGET NUMBERS*

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\$215 million in the current fiscal year 2012-13

\$180 million in 2013-14

\$180 million in 2014-15

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Voucher supporters have long resisted oversight of choice schools by the DPI, arguing that freedom from state standards and requirements is a key factor that makes voucher schools unique. This federal ruling opens the door to more oversight by the DPI. Sorting this out should give lawmakers pause as they consider voucher expansion. Whether it will have that effect remains to be seen.

Recently, state Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) has begun calling for a statewide expansion of vouchers while three GOP state Senators stated publicly that they will not vote for the budget bill unless it

The Value of a Legislative Breakfast

Sheboygan county school leaders and lawmakers meet monthly to discuss education issues

School districts in Sheboygan County have been enjoying monthly face-to-face meetings with their local legislators for over 20 years. These meetings offer benefits for both school leaders and legislators, providing each group a forum to build relationships, share concerns and ideas, and help each other understand the issues at hand.

School board members typically accompany school superintendents to the events. All area legislators are invited, and regularly attend, including Sen. Joe Leibham (R-Sheboygan), Sen. Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend), Rep. Mike Endsley (R-Sheboygan), Rep. Steve Kestell (R-Elkhart Lake), and Rep. Daniel LaMahieu. Members of Congress are also invited and will occasionally send staffers.

The meetings generally begin with introductions, so everyone knows who is in the room, and what perspective they are coming from as they address policy issues and give feedback. Each legislator (or staffer) then gives an update regarding key policy issues facing education. The facilitator seeks reaction, feedback and questions from those in attendance.

“The idea is to create two-way communication,” said Dr. Clark Reinke, superintendent of Plymouth School District. Reinke also serves

as the chairman, facilitating the meetings.

The breakfasts provide an opportunity for school districts to share their local stories on how state decisions are impacting their ability to be successful.

“These forums allow our representatives to hear first hand what local districts have accomplished, are struggling with and how legislative action can elevate roadblocks to reform,” said Sheboygan Area School District board member Larry Samet. “A wide range of topics have been discussed from Act 10 to closing the achievement gaps. We appreciate the opportunity to provide accurate, factual information to aid in their decision-making. I hope that other school boards would consider a similar event.”

This forum has been especially important over the last several years, as funding for public education and changes to education have become high profile issues at the state level.

“The opportunity to hear our legislators’ point of view on issues facing education, and, in turn, ask questions or provide feedback has proved to be a valuable method of connecting with our legislators,” said Dr. Joseph Sheehan, superintendent of the Sheboygan Area School District. “It’s important to keep in touch on a regular basis.”

“I think it is good for administra-

tors and board members to hear candid responses and updates from their legislators on the same issues,” said Rep. Steve Kestell. “I wouldn’t say that there is always 100 percent agreement in the room, but we have good dialog, and I think come away with a better understanding of each other’s perspectives.”

The group meets faithfully each month, and school superintendents applaud the effort by legislators to attend.

Kestell, who regularly attends, commented, “Everyone knows that education is one of the most important topics at the Capitol, and public education accounts for the largest portion of the state budget. It just makes sense for legislators and educators to talk.”

Both Sheboygan and Plymouth School Districts include a regular report from the Legislative Breakfast at monthly school board meetings, which are televised and open to the public. ■

Sondalle is the marketing specialist for the Sheboygan Area School District.

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