

School Funding Takes Center Stage

Education issues will be at the heart of many debates of the 2015-16 Wisconsin Legislature



The 2015-16 Wisconsin Legislature is now in full swing. Education issues will be at the heart of many of the key debates. With issues affecting K-12 education playing such a prominent role and with so much at stake, it is incredibly important for school leaders, especially locally elected school board members, to make their voices heard.

Here is a summary of where a number of key education-related issues currently stand:

■ School Funding – A cut, a freeze, then a bit of a thaw

In early February, Gov. Scott Walker proposed a two-year (2015-17) state budget that eliminates a \$150 per-pupil aid payment due school districts in 2015-16. The loss of this aid will result in an immediate \$127 million cut to all school districts next year. Districts will be unable to make up for this cut in 2015-16 because per-pupil revenue limits are frozen at the 2014-15 level. (See below.) Per-pupil aid would be restored and slightly increased the following year (2016-17), when districts would receive approximately \$165 per pupil or \$141 million through this aid.

Although key majority Republican lawmakers say they support additional state K-12 education funding to restore this cut, your advocacy is needed. Many of these supportive legislators say the state's ability to

provide additional aid to schools will depend upon whether re-estimates of state revenues due in late April or early May show significant growth over earlier estimates. While that is encouraging, it suggests that if state revenue estimates don't increase, the cut could remain in place.

A key focus of the governor has been holding the line on property taxes. The proposed budget provides modest property tax relief (a \$5 cut for the typical homeowner in each year). This tax relief, however, is largely accomplished by clamping down on school spending — the proposed budget provides no increase in school district revenue limits in either year — and by channeling \$211.2 million over the biennium to the school levy tax credit, which lowers property tax bills.

The proposed budget provides a modest \$108.1 million increase in state general school aid in the second year. Because revenue limits are frozen, this increase will also result in no additional resources for school programs. Any additional aid districts receive must be used to reduce property taxes.

The bottom line is that while about \$320 million in additional state funding in the proposed budget is said to be “school-related,” none of that money will provide additional resources to schools. It all goes toward reducing property taxes.

It is important that you communicate about your district's story about how the funding cut in the proposed budget and the freeze in revenue limits will affect the students you serve. You should be communicating with your parents, communities, local media and, especially, with your legislators about particular aspects of the budget bill that are of concern to you.

Public K-12 education is in competition with many other programs for scarce dollars in this state budget (as we describe below). Our success in securing additional funding will depend in large part on how well we communicate these stories and how persuasive we can be.

■ Voucher Expansion and Changes in Voucher Funding

The 2015-17 budget proposes expanding the state-wide voucher program for students from low-income families by eliminating the 1,000-student cap on enrollment in the voucher program. But more than that, the budget bill also proposes paying for vouchers directly out of the state general aid — money public schools receive from the state — a dramatic change.

In the past, vouchers have been funded from a separate appropriation. Now, under the budget as proposed, for every dollar that a new voucher student in the statewide program receives, public schools will receive less state aid. Beginning in

A key focus of the governor has been holding the line on property taxes ... largely accomplished by clamping down on school spending.

2015-16, resident districts of students who are entering the statewide voucher program for the first time would lose state aid for each new voucher entrant regardless of whether that student was ever enrolled in the district. And because those school districts can't raise property taxes to make up for this lost aid, this will be another cut for public school students. Beginning in 2016-17, affected districts would be eligible to receive aid on these new voucher students.

The WASB opposes the proposed voucher expansion and the changes to funding.

■ **Accountability, Assessments and Academic Standards**

Already, three competing versions of school accountability legislation — one from Assembly leaders, one from Senate leaders, and one from the governor — have been introduced and two versions have been the subject of lengthy public hearings.

Key differences between the versions include: whether persistent low performance should trigger sanctions, such as a school's closure or its conversion into an independent charter school not overseen by the locally elected school board; whether all publicly funded students must take the same assessment or whether multiple tests will be used to gauge student academic performance; and whether (A-F) letter grades will be assigned to schools.

Sources indicate the State Assembly may move forward on its own version of accountability legislation, which includes sanctions on low-performing schools.

The proposed budget would effectively end the use of the Smarter Balanced assessment in grade 3-8 after 2014-15 by prohibiting the state superintendent from adopting or approving examinations developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and by prohibiting the state from participating in the Smarter Balanced Consortium upon the effective date of

the budget act. (The proposed budget, however, continues to provide state funding to cover cost increases associated with administering ACT testing for students in grades 9-11 and Dynamic Learning testing for students with disabilities.)

Under the proposed budget, schools and districts would be allowed to choose which assessments are administered to their students in 2015-16 and beyond. Assessment options would include a state test adopted and approved by the state superintendent as well as three to five alternative tests certified by the Value-Added Research Center (VARC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison although no funding is provided to VARC for this purpose. Presumably, if these provisions remain in the budget bill, the DPI would be required to put out an RFP to a variety of test vendors.

The WASB has argued strongly in favor of maintaining the current law requirement that all publicly funded students take the same test so student performance across all schools and sectors can be accurately compared.

Although the proposed budget doesn't explicitly prohibit the state superintendent from adopting or implementing a new and different test (other than Smarter Balanced) that is aligned to the Common Core standards, it prohibits the state superintendent from giving weight to any Common Core standards currently in effect and from adopting or implementing any new Common Core standards.

Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee) appears poised to introduce a separate bill outside the budget that would give districts a one-year waiver from having to report student results on the Smarter Balanced exams for purposes of school report cards and Educator Effectiveness. An earlier proposal he floated to allow districts to opt out of administering the Smarter Balanced tests may be shelved because the state is required (at the possible risk of losing federal funding) by the No Child Left Behind (a/k/a ESEA) law and subsequent waiver to administer the same test to all public school students statewide that is aligned to college-and career-readiness. ■

WASB's Day at the Capitol

& Other Opportunities for Board Member Advocacy

Clearly, public school advocates, including board members, administrators, and the WASB government relations staff, have their work cut out for them.

The WASB is here to help you. We especially encourage you to attend the WASB Day at the Capitol on Wednesday, March 18. It's your chance to join a broad-based coalition of school leaders who will gather in Madison to share common concerns and meet with legislators.

WASB staff will arrange meetings for you with the lawmakers who represent your district. Before your meetings you will receive briefings on the key provisions in the state budget, key talking points and training on how to effectively meet with your legislators.

Watch for Legislative Alerts on key budget provisions in your email inbox and read the weekly Legislative Update in the WASB *eConnection* weekly newsletter for more information about the budget bill, including information about any budget hearings in your area. Also, please visit our State Budget website for additional information. (On the WASB website, wasb.org, click on Advocacy and then State Issues.)

We encourage you to sign up for your legislators' E-Updates (e-newsletters) on their websites and check those websites for upcoming listening session announcements. These listening sessions are a great opportunity for you to meet locally with you legislators and to bring concerned parents and community members with you to share their concerns with. □