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STATE SENATOR

June 14, 2017

Will Wisconsin's Future Children Receive an Equal Education?

By
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Progress with the state budget is at a standoff in the Capitol. Behind closed doors, leaders are talking details and trying to find votes.

Openly, legislative leaders point to a lack of agreement on public education. They say no progress can happen until they round up necessary votes for the education portion of the budget. Privately, some GOP lawmakers are also angling to spend money on a big change to business personal property taxes. However, changes to taxes could take away money promised to schools.

Education is the largest part of the general fund budget (the portion of our budget paid for with mostly income and sales tax). Local school funding is made up of a combination of state aid and local property taxes. The two sources of money interact a bit like a teeter-totter – as one source drops (state aid), the other source goes up (property taxes). For example, property taxes go up school districts pass referenda to fund needs left unserved by declining state aid.

Wisconsin pays for schools through an *Equalized Aid* formula, which is meant to equalize resources to children no matter where they live in the state. The idea of equal opportunity for children regardless of their zip code is deeply rooted in our state. Principles enshrined in Wisconsin's Constitution include public education as a state function that is free with reasonable equality of education opportunities for all children and without excessive reliance on property taxes. Lawmakers must grapple with meeting those principles.

Under the Governor's proposal, school funding through equalized aid would be lower in the 2018-19 school year than it was thirteen years prior. The effect of these decisions will intensify the inequalities schoolchildren across Wisconsin face.

Lawmakers admit the state's way of funding schools is broken. Nevertheless, legislative leaders appear poised to ignore the need to change the formula. Instead, Governor Walker's budget proposal increases state money to local schools but allocates that aid *outside* the funding formula. Thus, the wealthy suburban districts get the same amount of new money per student as the poor rural or inner city districts. The Governor also

proposed adding to property tax credits, which lowers property taxes in a way that benefits wealthier districts.

Recently, Assembly Republicans released their own education-funding plan that lowers the Governor's aid proposal and eliminates any increases in Sparsity Aid, which is targeted at rural schools.

Wisconsin is changing and these changes are reflected in our schoolchildren's needs. Child poverty is rising. In a recent ten-year period, poverty (measured by the federal definition of eligibility for free and reduced lunch) more than doubled. The number of students with special education and multi-lingual needs also increased. In addition, rising property values, declining enrollment and low income in rural areas combine to create a crisis for rural schools.

These realities make the argument for changes in our equalized aid formula. State Superintendent of Schools Tony Evers recognized these needs years ago and proposed new ways to pay for schools. State legislative leaders rejected these changes and instead expanded state funded private school programs.

Current school funding proposals add up to a future that is increasingly unequal. Lawmakers must address the real problems facing today's children and teachers. We must ask the hard questions that underlie decisions about money and schools. Should a child, born into a poor family, an inner-city neighborhood or a rural country home, or born with a special need face fewer opportunities in his or her public school?

More money in tax credits and the failure to acknowledge the changing needs of our students creates a more unequal experience for children around our state. This problem is solvable. But the path majority lawmakers appear to be following takes us deeper into the woods of inequity.

Hanging in the balance is the answer to the question; *will future children across the state receive an equal education?*

(A big thanks to Russ Kava, senior analyst with the Legislative Fiscal Bureau and his colleagues for their recent papers related to school budget decisions. This column used many details from their work. The conclusions are mine).