



Building Support for Public School Funding

With the current legislative session wrapping up, school funding has been a hot button issue. At the time of this writing, Assembly leaders were pushing a proposal that would cut revenue limit authority for Racine and any school district that has students participating in the statewide voucher program. Estimates indicate that at least 142 districts would lose revenue limit authority in the upcoming year.

This comes on top of a two-year “freeze” on revenue limits and is the latest attack on public school funding in what has become an ongoing back and forth between lawmakers and school leaders. Since 2011, when per-pupil aid was drastically cut in the state budget, we’ve been trying to build school funding back up. Considering that state support hasn’t even kept up with inflation, the request for more school funding is not unreasonable. Since 2006-07, the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index has been about 1.95 percent. Meanwhile, the statewide average revenue limit has actually decreased since the 2010-11 school year.

With the current state of school funding, many school districts are forced to rely on school referendums to provide the resources to cover basic operational costs. Meanwhile, lawmakers have proposed strictly limiting when schools can take referendum questions before the voters.

Earlier this year, there were signs of hope in the school funding debate. In late January, Marquette University’s Law School conducted a poll in which Wisconsin residents were asked about their thoughts on school funding levels. In response, 57 percent said their local public schools are receiving too little funding from the state.

We saw the public’s support for public education during the spring primaries in February. School districts were mostly successful in passing referendums. Although it was a small sampling of districts, the majority of communities supported their local schools and agreed that they need more funding to serve students.

At the State Education Convention in January, we heard Gov. Scott Walker promise to use any potential savings from his proposed changes to the state employee health care system towards public education. It’s unclear as to what the savings might be — or whether there would be any at all — and even whether the state Legislature would support such a proposal, but it is encouraging to hear at least some comments about increasing public school funding.

With the public supportive of boosting state funding for our public schools, it is important to use this momentum to gear up for the school funding debate in the next biennium.

As lawmakers and candidates are preparing their campaigns, it’s time to

start laying the plans and groundwork for meeting with them and securing commitments to increase school funding and revenue limits.

Now is the time to look at reserving dates and locations for candidate forums and look for other opportunities to invite candidates to your schools so you can educate them and get their perspective. If your district is interested in hosting a candidate forum, the WASB can help. Contact Dan Rossmiller, WASB government relations director, at drossmiller@wasb.org, or Chris Kulow, government relations specialist, at ckulow@wasb.org.

It won’t be easy restoring school funding but recent developments show that the public is supportive. We need to let our lawmakers and candidates know that investing in our public schools must be a priority.

In closing, I would like to thank all of our members who attended the 95th State Education Convention in January. We are proud to host this event with the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators and the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials. We hope you had a memorable experience, connected with other Wisconsin school leaders, and gained important information and ideas to improve student success in your schools. ■

With the public supportive of boosting state funding for our public schools, it is important to use this momentum to gear up for the school funding debate in the next biennium.