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**GOP looks to federal money to boost school districts with in-person instruction**

*By WisPolitics.com*

As Republicans push to reward school districts that have provided in-person instruction over the past year, using federal funds from the latest COVID-19 package has emerged as a possible path to that goal, according to multiple sources.

And Republicans could pair that with an infusion of state aid into a program that distributes money equally among school districts per pupil regardless of how property-rich or poor they are. That would address a GOP complaint that the bulk of the federal money being distributed through the COVID-19 relief packages is benefiting districts such as Milwaukee, which largely didn’t provide in-person instruction this school year while many schools in GOP areas did.

How to reward schools that have been providing in-person instruction is one of the more significant questions facing the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee as it begins work on Gov. Tony Evers’ budget in earnest. The committee has already signaled plans to scale back the budget significantly from what Evers has proposed.

Still, with his powerful veto pen, adding language to the budget that would direct state funds to schools that have been in-person would also mean opening up avenues for Evers to redirect the money and use it how he’d like. Two years ago, he used his partial veto pen to increase per-pupil aid payments simply by crossing out some language Republicans put into the budget.

Using federal money as part of the approach to rewarding districts for in-person instruction would avoid adding language to the budget that Evers could then veto, budget watchers say. The governor has veto power over Joint Finance plans for the federal money received from the COVID plans, but the 12-4 GOP majority on the committee means Republicans would have enough votes to override it.

Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee have already once used in-person learning as a benchmark for distributing a pot of federal COVID relief sent to Wisconsin.

Still, calls to do more have intensified since figures from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau showed Milwaukee Public Schools in line for more than a third of the $2.2 billion-plus in federal aid Wisconsin districts will receive through the three stimulus packages. The nearly $798 million amounts to $11,242 per student in the state’s largest district.

That’s because the three COVID packages — two signed by President Trump and one by President Biden — required 90 percent of the money to be distributed through a formula that accounts for the number of students in poverty in a district.

The school district in Racine is in line for $85.1 million from the three packages, while Madison will see $70.7 million and Green Bay is to receive $72.6 million.

In February, the Department of Public Instruction submitted a plan to JFC to distribute the second pot of COVID-19 federal funds to 172 districts. It was designed to ensure each district got a minimum grant of $395 per pupil. Joint Finance reworked a pot of $65 million to distribute it based on a formula that accounts for the hours of in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year. Only the 172 districts that were eligible for the grants under the DPI proposal are able to qualify for the money under the JFC approach.

This time around, the committee could rework a pot of $46 million from the third COVID package.

DPI last month submitted its plan to JFC for the money. Dividing up the funds under the formula that accounts for poverty creates varying grant amounts and a handful of districts and charter schools don’t qualify for any money. DPI wants to use the money that isn’t earmarked for any uses to ensure most districts get a minimum grant of $600,000.

The latest round of COVID money also includes nearly $108 million that’s earmarked to address learning loss, pay for summer learning and fund after-school programs. The committee may be able to account for in-person instruction in distributing a portion of those funds, though there are requirements that the money be used to benefit certain groups of students, including those experiencing homelessness or in foster care.

Republicans also could weigh their options on using state money as part of their approach to rewarding districts for in-person instruction.

General school aids, which use a formula that accounts for district property values, are the largest chunk of state aid sent to districts. This category amounted to more than $4.9 billion in 2020-21.

Republicans in 2011 first created a per-pupil categorical aid that distributes money equally to districts regardless of property values. It was nearly $617 million in 2020-21.

With Republicans unhappy at how much Milwaukee is getting per pupil from the federal money compared to schools in their districts, one option would be to rely more on the per-pupil category for whatever increase in state aid is approved this budget.

Evers called for a 6.2 percent increase in general school aids over the biennium compared to a 4.9 percent increase in per-pupil aid.

Utilizing the existing per-pupil categorical aid would mean districts like Milwaukee that make out well under the federal formula would still see a boost in state aid. But it wouldn’t be as significant of an advantage for them compared to putting money into the general school aid formula.

Republicans could consider the creation of a new categorical aid solely for districts that provided in-person instruction. But that would also add new language to the budget that Evers could rework to direct the money elsewhere.

Using the existing categorical aid would avoid putting new language into the budget that could be vetoed.

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