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EDUCATION

These 19 school districts could get the least funding, unless a new bill succeeds

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MADISON - The state budget enacted earlier this summer provides nearly \$1.2 billion in new funding authority for public schools, but one group of school districts will miss out on the increases.

Nineteen school districts in Wisconsin where voters turned town referenda will not be able to access the boosts to their revenue-raising authority because of a state law that prohibits them from accessing increases for three years.

But a new proposal introduced by two Republican lawmakers, which has also gained support from Democrats, could eliminate that exception. The bill authors hope to get the proposal to the floor when the legislature reconvenes in fall.

Here's why those districts were left behind and what the proposal could mean for them.

Why do Wisconsin school districts receive different funding levels to begin with?

Wisconsin school districts have been confined since 1993 by state-imposed revenue limits, which were locked in at different amounts for each district, depending on what they happened to spend the prior year.

Revenue limits determine how much money districts are allowed to take in through local taxes and state aids. Districts can go to referendum to ask voters to raise more than their limits.

The limits initially rose each year with inflation, but that provision was deleted in 2009, and any increases have since been left to the discretion of lawmakers.

Why were 19 Wisconsin school districts left with less funding?

This summer saw a series of deals between Democratic Gov. Tony Evers, who wanted more funding for public schools, and Republican lawmakers, who wanted more funding for charter schools and private schools that receive publicly funded vouchers.

More: Why some schools will win bigger than others under state budget passed by lawmakers

More: Wisconsin is poised to expand vouchers for private schools. Here's what that means.

In the same bill that raised voucher payments for private schools, lawmakers included a boost for about half of the state's public school districts that historically have been limited to the least base funding: under \$11,000 per student.

About 221 of Wisconsin's 421 public school districts had been getting less than \$11,000 and stood to benefit from the change, according to preliminary calculations by the state Department of Public Instruction, while almost all other school districts were already getting more than that.

But of those districts that stood to benefit, the DPI estimated 19 would be left out because of a 2017 state law. That law punishes districts that have tried and failed to convince their local voters to raise school taxes via referendum. The law prohibits those districts from benefitting from changes to the state's minimum funding allowance for three years after the failed referendum.

In his budget proposal, Evers proposed removing that exception from state law, but Republican lawmakers didn't keep the elimination in their version of the budget. Now, two Republicans are proposing the elimination with their own bill.

Why was the bill introduced?

Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, an author of the bill, said taking policy items out of the budget-writing process is typical. He said repealing the provision was brought up during discussions over shared revenue and education funding, but there "didn't seem to be a lot of interest at the time."

Testin said the bill was introduced after lawmakers became aware of which districts would not be able to take advantage of funding increases, including three districts he represents: Auburndale, Berlin Area and Sparta Area.

"It's only fair that we give them that opportunity," Testin said in an interview. "For some of these more rural districts, it provides some significant heartburn not having that certainty. I think with what we're trying to do here, we'll provide a little bit more certainty moving forward where they won't be hampered by the three-year cap."

Does the bill have bipartisan support?

Sixteen Republicans and eight Democrats have signed onto the bill so far. Sen. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, noted that Democrats proposed repealing the provision in amendments they offered during debate on the shared revenue deal and the state budget, which Republicans voted down.

"When this bill came forward, part of me worried about whether this is serious, given that Republicans had an opportunity to fix this already," Spreitzer said.

Spreitzer said he signed onto the "bipartisan opportunity" because three districts he represents are affected. That includes Beloit, which held a narrowly failed referendum earlier this year. Beloit Superintendent Willie Garrison told the Journal Sentinel earlier this summer that he hoped lawmakers would take another look at the three-year cap.

Testin hopes committees will quickly hold hearings so the bill can be ready when the full legislature reconvenes in the fall. He noted districts are "up against a time crunch" as they finalize their budgets in October.

"We want to make sure we have this ready in time and they can take advantage of the increases," Testin said.

Which districts were left behind?

Of the 24 lawmakers that have signed up as co-sponsors so far, about half represent districts that would be affected by the proposal.

The 19 districts where referendum questions failed and are set to be allowed less than \$11,000 per student are: Arcadia, Auburndale, Beloit, Berlin Area, Bristol No. 1, Horicon, Lake Mills Area, Merrill Area, Milton, North Lake, Northern Ozaukee, Parkview, Silver Lake J1, Southwestern Wisconsin, Sparta Area, Spring Valley, Valders Area, Walworth J1 and Westby Area.

How would the proposal affect the 19 districts?

In Sparta, Superintendent Sam Russ said his district's referendum last spring failed by less than 100 votes. The district had asked voters for permission to raise an additional \$2.1 million — the amount of federal COVID relief dollars the district will lose after this school year.

If the state proposal goes through, his district could collect an additional \$1.6 million, which Russ said is "desperately needed."

After Sparta's referendum failed, Russ said the district already had to make the difficult choice to close an elementary school, Cataract Elementary. Russ said the district has dipped into its federal relief dollars to sustain regular staff positions as it battles inflation, and it has had to increase class sizes.

Russ said the additional budget dollars would allow the district to address facility needs: replacing playground equipment, windows, doors, lighting and technology.

"We've been asking districts to do more with less," Testin said. "We want to make sure that they're able to keep up with inflation and ensure that they can provide high-quality education for the students that they serve."

In Auburndale, Superintendent Kevin Yeske said he suddenly had "a lot of hope" when he heard from the Journal Sentinel that lawmakers were considering removing the penalty on districts with failed referenda. Auburndale's referendum failed this spring by 22 votes.

He said he had lost optimism after reaching out to lawmakers and "anyone who would listen" about the need to include districts like his in the funding increase. Without it, the district planned to cut several staff positions.

"There are 19 districts in the state that, we're all going to be running a 102-meter race when everybody else is running 100," Yeske said. "I can't justify that to my students; I can't justify that to my community."