



The Future of Wisconsin Education

Increasing Opportunities and Outcomes for All Students

By: Rep. Mary Felzkowski

Since becoming a legislator in 2013, one of my top legislative goals has been to help reform the way we deliver educational opportunity in our state. As a representative of a heavily rural district, I see firsthand how smaller, more sparse districts struggle to compete with their counterparts in more urban areas. Despite smaller class sizes, many students in these districts require remedial studies when they reach post-secondary levels. The Shared Services package in the Assembly Republican K-12 Education Budget Proposal would take a large step toward ending this regional disparity, moving toward true educational equity, and improving outcomes for all Wisconsin students rural, urban, and in-between.

Wisconsin supports 422 school districts across the state. Its elementary-secondary enrollment is just shy of 875,000 students, with average spending per pupil just above \$11,100. Many of Wisconsin's Midwestern neighbors are able to deliver education with far less spending going toward the overhead costs of bricks and mortar. Take Minnesota, a comparable state to Wisconsin in both enrollment and per pupil spending. According to U.S. Census Bureau data for 2013-14, the North Star state has just 332 districts, almost one hundred less than Wisconsin. That is one hundred *more* opportunities to focus spending in the classroom in Minnesota than we currently offer in Wisconsin.

Further, of Wisconsin's 422 districts, more than 150 of them have only one single school facility. This means that about 10% of all students in Wisconsin are accounted for in 36% of the school districts. Of these districts, at least 75% of them spend more than the state average on administrative and operations spending.

How can we help Wisconsin districts like these to move toward better utilization of their spending so that it truly impacts pupil learning? I believe we strongly answer this question in our K-12 Shared Services package. Our plan focuses on three tools for districts (shared services, whole grade sharing, and merging) to help them join forces on mutual needs. Simply put, districts, schools, and students do better when they work together.

Shared Services

Our plan would create a pilot program to incentivize districts to share administrative positions like a superintendent, business manager, Human Resources Director, or IT Director to reduce overhead costs. Moreover, our plan allows for districts to be able to collaborate with *any* unit of government, like a CESA, or a county.

This program is especially helpful for smaller districts within close proximity to each other, as with many of the one-facility districts mentioned above. A great example is each of Wisconsin's ten Union High School (UHS) districts. Each UHS receives incoming 9th graders from several of the underlying 46 elementary (K-8) districts. *Forty-six* separate districts. These K-8s could easily share services with each other and their UHS to better allocate their funding.

Whole Grade Sharing

Current law provides districts with the ability to use a Whole Grade Sharing model. For example, Districts A and B both have their own elementary schools. However, District A chooses to host grades K-5 for students from both districts, and District B chooses to host grades 6-12 for students from both districts. Both districts benefit from the ability to increase opportunities in the classroom, whether it be for more teachers and classes, technology upgrades, or equipment purchases.

Unfortunately, the current program is not utilized because districts are uncertain of what their new funding levels would be until after they adopt the model. This proposal would offer a defined amount of aid above and beyond current state aid available. As through shared services, this incentive helps to districts take that leap into working together.

Merger

Current law allows for two or more districts to reorganize or merge together and provides incentive funding for them to do so. However, like Whole Grade Sharing, the program is not utilized because of considerable uncertainty in how funding will be allocated once the districts become one. Our proposal would create a new incentive program with a defined increase in funds that will give certainty to these districts.

Today, many smaller districts struggle to offer the same opportunities to their students as those in larger, urban areas. These shared services tools can help districts work together to keep good teachers, increase outcomes, and offer equitable, sustainable, and effective funding. Incentivizing these methods of collaboration between districts will ensure that every single student in the state of the Wisconsin has equal opportunity to succeed.

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