

Stop playing games and fund our schools

GUEST OPINION

By Rep. Deb Andraca

Understanding our school funding system requires some education. It involves property taxes, revenue caps, and other wonky things that most people don't have time to wrap their heads around. But whether or not you have school-aged children, if you care about the strength of our future workforce and the long-term economic health of our state, the cynical shell game that's happening right now with our state education dollars demands your attention and a call to your local elected leaders.

Let's start with the budget process. The Republican leaders on the Joint Finance Committee think you won't notice if they call millions of dollars "education funding" — even when none of it will actually help our schools. They seem to think you won't mind that even when the state is flush with cash, they will only provide our students with the bare minimum.

Here's what they don't want you to know. Wisconsin schools will receive \$2.3 billion in federal dollars to help pay for expenses as districts recover from the pandemic. The money can be used for things such as responding to students' academic, social and emotional needs, assisting with learning losses, supporting mental health efforts, paying for safety enhancements, and purchasing technology that will move student learning forward. Seeing a big pot of money headed our way, the Republican JFC budget-writers thought "hey, the schools are getting federal dollars, so we don't need to fulfill our responsibility as legislators to provide our schools with reliable state funding."

Fortunately, someone in Washington anticipated this move and required all states to minimally fund their own schools in order to be eligible for the \$2.3 billion. To meet this "maintenance of effort" requirement, the JFC added \$408 million to state general school aid over the next two years. Think of meeting the maintenance of effort requirements as essentially earning the "participation" ribbon in the race to a world-class education.

Here's the sneaky part: These additional "education" dollars won't even reach our students at all. Municipalities have a state-mandated revenue cap which limits the amount that a school district can raise,

than had been anticipated. After a decade of short-changing local schools, the state has an opportunity to use some of this surplus to finally relieve the financial pressure and put a halt to the endless referendums for school expenses. Unfortunately, even under this most rosy of fiscal scenarios, Republicans still kept K-12 funding at such a low level that the rate does not even keep up with inflation.

Which leaves many of us to wonder, under what scenario will Wisconsin finally invest in our kids' futures? Not when we have more federal money. Not when we have more state money. It's an endless scarcity mentality toward public schools that is harming today's students and tomorrow's workforce. The 23rd District is blessed with some of the best public schools in the state, but they cannot be expected to continue to deliver excellence when they are given the bare minimum to work with. Other districts with higher numbers of students living in poverty are eligible for supplemental funding but most suburban schools are not, leaving them in a particular bind. It seems that even when our state has the means, some lack the will to invest in our public schools.

When it comes to education, the Wisconsin Idea was once a model for the nation: Together we all invest in high-quality public education for every student, and in return our students stay and build a strong future for their own families. Instead we have elected leaders playing games with our budget and forcing us into a race to the bottom, leaving our state with a less educated workforce that will be unprepared for the jobs of the future.

School funding is complicated but the answers are simple. If we expect our kids to get a world-class education, if we want to attract more businesses and workers to our state, and if we want to compete in a global marketplace for talent, then we need to invest in high-quality public education and stop playing political games with our kids' futures.

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and therefore spend. In some budgets, the state will raise the revenue cap to provide for more actual dollars, but the JFC didn't do that this time. So all of this additional "education" money will go to local municipalities, but can only be used as a property tax cut — which is a good thing for homeowners, but does not provide an additional cent to fund our schools.



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In the midst of the budget process, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau provided a projection that Wisconsin is likely to bring in \$4.5 billion more revenue

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