***Editor’s note:*** This column is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members by WisPolitics.com. Proper attribution to WisPolitics.com is appreciated. Also, please publish the tagline that is included at the end of the column.

**Committee offers smorgasbord of school funding options**

A legislative task force tried to tackle school funding issues. Members came up with a smorgasbord but no firm plan.

"The reality is Governor-elect (Tony) Evers will put his budget out at a number and the (Legislature) will counter that," said one of the task force co-chairs, Sen. Luther Olsen, R-Ripon.

The proposals, which came out of a series of public hearings held over the last year across the state, touch on a variety of topics ranging from declining enrollment to revenue limit adjustments, sparsity aid, early childhood education and the educator workforce shortage.

Many of the topics include several recommendations that the co-chairs said would allow lawmakers and the incoming Evers administration to weigh their options and come to a decision.

"Our goal today is to say, 'Let's keep all these options on the table,' Olsen said on Dec. 19. "These are the problems; these are the options to solve the problems."

But some members criticized the approach, with Green Bay School District Superintendent Michelle Langenfeld knocking the idea of releasing a "menu of solutions without clearly identifying the problem" commissioners were trying to solve.

"I don't know how you come to consensus around solutions if we don't clearly identify what we're trying to achieve," she said.

And others questioned why issues such as private school vouchers weren't included in the list of recommendations.

Rep. Sondy Pope, the ranking Democrat on the Assembly Education Committee, said the nearly 40-page proposal document failed to capture the scope of issues members heard in their public hearings. She suggested the exclusion of some items could be "politically motivated."

"I think we aren't capturing all of the problems or barriers or stumbling blocks or whatever you want to call it to what's happening in education today, because I think this is too narrow to understand what we've heard in every single hearing," the Mount Horeb representative said.

But Rep. Joel Kitchens, co-chair of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding, countered that approving the recommendations doesn't mean members believe "this is going to solve every problem in education." And he noted the proposals need to get consensus from all members to be introduced, which is why, he said, some topics were excluded.

"We need things to come out of here that we all can agree on," the Sturgeon Bay Republican said.

Among the recommendations commissioners are forwarding to the Legislature are indexing the per-pupil adjustment to inflation and giving districts a broader ability to adjust their revenue limits.

The per-pupil adjustment was previously indexed to inflation from 1998 through 2009, per a Legislative Fiscal Bureau summary, though it was removed under the 2009-11 budget and set at a fixed amount for a few years. The recommendation language says if a budget provides a per-pupil adjustment, the inflation indexing provision would automatically go into effect.

Members are also recommending giving school districts the ability to up their revenue limits to fund school resource officers, safety expenses, mental health costs and more. Still, commissioners agreed it'd be challenging to gain support in the Legislature.

Republican Rep. Romaine Quinn, of Barron, noted that giving anyone the ability to go outside the revenue limits would amount to a "really tough sell."

"If we get one (approved by lawmakers), I'd be amazed," added Olsen, noting that the commission would be recommending in total seven different areas that revenue limit adjustments be created.

And CESA 6 CEO Ted Neitzke said incorporating those options would open up a conversation at the district level about mental health, school safety and other areas.

"This allows greater local access and control to these decisions. That's just my opinion," he said.

The commission also approved a number of different options to increase the special education reimbursement rate.

Members during their public hearings heard many districts are forced to use regular education money, or Fund 10, to cover special ed costs for their students.

The Department of Public Instruction had previously requested an increase in the amount of money available to reimburse districts, with the intent to raise reimbursement rates to 28 percent in 2017-18 and 30 percent in 2018-19. The current rate, 26 percent, stayed static after those requests weren't included in the budget.

The five options members approved Wednesday included bumping up the reimbursement rates to 28 percent and 30 percent in the first and second years of the biennium, up to an increase of 33 and 50 percent under a different proposal.

Some called for settling on a single option to propose to the Legislature.

Wisconsin Association of School Boards Government Relations Director Dan Rossmiller said while "any increase is better than where we're at right now, I would hope that we could be a little bit bold."

Julie Underwood, a UW-Madison professor, said it's important the commission's recommendation reflects that the state needs to "spend significantly more" on the special ed reimbursement rate.

"What we have now is a small amount of money that is being spent on greater and greater needs on more and more students across the state. And it is not workable, it's not sustainable, it's not what we should be doing for children and families in the state," she said.

The recommendations don't include an overall price tag or cost range. Olsen told WisPolitics.com ahead of the hearing that the commission "knew when we started it was going to cost money" and instead decided to take an approach where the recommendations represented a "smorgasbord" of ideas lawmakers could choose from.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

*Copyright © WisPolitics.com*