

State School Funding Cuts Hit Home

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Voters in the Prescott School District face yet another school referendum, the 27th in just 15 years, due to Wisconsin's convoluted school funding formula. The school funding system is definitely not working for Prescott.

PRESCOTT, WI - What's wrong with school funding? Explaining this to voters is difficult. Try explaining it to a ninth grader who is losing a favorite teacher. The teacher is not retiring. At 53 and after teaching for 29 years, he lost his job.

Recently I spent a day teaching high school students about school funding and the state budget. Later that day I presented similar material to staff and school board members. I learned much more than the students did during my day as teacher.

Prescott considers itself a suburb of Saint Paul. Only 20 minutes away, folks go to church, shop, and read the newspaper from the Twin Cities. Few hear news from Madison.

However, Wisconsin's convoluted school funding formula is now the topic of conversation.

Prescott school district lost a referendum in February. Voters will soon decide another – the 27th referenda in just 15 years!

"Between building and levy-cap votes I lost track of the count," Mandy wrote to me describing

the problem. I'm not surprised she lost count.

With the failed referendum, officials made hard decisions. They cut programs at the middle school. Cuts were made to music (lost 1.5 teachers), business and computer classes. Officials cut back on high school art, career and technical education and business education.

Because of the failed referendum, ten percent of the budget is gone next year. Ironically, 10% of Prescott's budget is nearly the same amount as Prescott's share of the 2011 historic cut to state aid to schools.

If the new vote fails, over-crowding and temporary classrooms become permanent, faculty will be lost, students within the city limits will not be bussed, sports and extra-curricular activities will require fees. Regardless of the outcome of the vote, and because the new referendum is only a fifth the size of the original, many great teachers will still lose their jobs. Students will have fewer opportunities in such important areas as business education, math and technical education.

Prescott High exists because of referenda. Years ago, voters chose to build a high school. Then two years ago, voters supported building a new high school when enrollment increased and overcrowding in the middle school showed clear signs of tight quarters to come.

Just two months before the 2014 referendum to build the new high school, Prescott's future looked prosperous. Governor Walker and local leaders celebrated the opening of a new 300,000 square foot distribution center. The Governor hyped "500 jobs that could have gone elsewhere." His press release cited \$3.5 million in state dollars assigned to lure the company to Prescott with the promise of jobs.

Evidently, no one asked if the company would also import its workforce.

Most of the employees who work for the company in Wisconsin are the same people who worked there when it was located in Bloomington, Minnesota. Only now, they cross the river to get to work.

Few new local jobs and anticipated housing starts not materializing meant the expected increase in school enrollment did not happen. Fewer students results in less state aid. Costs of operating the new high school and increasing costs to maintain other buildings means some teachers and programs had to go.

The district is in the confusing position of having a new high school building and cutting teachers. Voters may raise property taxes only to see fewer dollars available for the district as enrollment drops.

Prescott is a poster child for all that's wrong with Wisconsin's school funding system and is why I am fighting to fix it.

By the time you read this, likely the Prescott referendum votes will be counted. While passage of the referendum is essential for continued operations, it will only bring the revenue limit back to where it is now.

As I left the Prescott High parking lot, I watched one of the terminated teachers carrying a box of personal items to his truck. I observed talented young athletes compete at a track meet. I could not help but wonder if Prescott voters realized the deep connection between decisions made by majority lawmakers in Madison and the loss of teachers, the new fees for athletics, and even the existence of the school referendum.

Elections have consequences. Those consequences can cut to the heart of a community.

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