KENOSHA UNIFIED

KUSD leaders call on legislature to commit state's surplus to funding public schools, special education

Terry Flores

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Price

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Kenosha Unified leaders are urging lawmakers for funding relief, including partial use of the state's more than $1 billion surplus, as taxpayers face sharp property tax hikes and sustained inflation.

KUSD, Wisconsin's third largest school district, joined leaders of the rest of the state's top five districts in calling for a bipartisan deal to solve the education funding crisis.

Kenosha Unified Superintendent Jeffrey Weiss joined superintendents from Madison, Milwaukee, Racine and Green Bay in seeking general state aid funding support, as well as funds for special education.

The district superintendents in joint letter penned a week ago, expressing “profound disappointment” when state elected officials failed to agree on the use of its surplus funds, which was estimated to be $4 billion during the previous legislative session, in supporting public education.

A proposal from Democratic Gov. Tony Evers for $1.3 billion in state funding for property tax relief ended in stalemate as Republic leaders called on him to reverse a veto from the 2023-25 legislative session that enabled the extension of the $325 per-pupil revenue limit increase for public schools for the next 400 years.

Locally, district residents received property tax bills that reflected “a significant increase in public school payments,” Weiss said as he addressed the issue at Tuesday’s School Board meeting. He also noted Kenosha has been identified as the “hottest housing market in the nation.”

“There is a direct link between these two announcements that are further complicated by the Wisconsin Legislature’s failure to provide additional aid to public schools,” Weiss said. “One of the major factors in determining state aid for schools is the value of property per enrolled student within the district’s boundaries. Districts with lower valuations are eligible for more state aid. Conversely, districts with higher valuations are eligible for less state aid.

“Property values in Kenosha and surrounding communities are growing faster than in many other areas of the state, while also experiencing declining (student) enrollment,” Weiss said. “This fact, combined with increased spending by other highly aided districts, has led to KUSD experiencing a reduction of over $9.4 million in state aid compared to last school year.”

Weiss said that despite districts receiving a $325 per-pupil increase, funding has fallen short of the costs of inflation … (and) the 400-year veto does not ensure that future increases will keep pace with inflation. (It) is further exacerbated by the state’s failure to fund the increase, forcing school districts to rely on local taxpayers to cover the difference.”

Meanwhile, the district was forced to shift significantly more money to voucher and independent charter schools, he said, which received a larger per-pupil funding hike than traditional public schools. KUSD is required by state law to transfer taxpayer funds to those schools – adding about $1.5 million in “unaided tax burden” to district residents, Weiss said.

Looking back, he said, prior to Act 10 which restricted collective bargaining for public unions, education took a hit as the state experienced an $800 million shortfall.

“Today, we have a $1.2 billion surplus. We’re not talking about restoring what was lost when we were $800 million short,” Weiss said in an interview with the Kenosha News. “In a time of budget repair, if that much money is taken away, … then when we have a budget surplus, it makes sense to me that money would be restored.”

Earlier, Unified officials were encouraged by projected state numbers, including increases to special education funding, so much so that the board opted for increases for teachers that kept pace with the consumer price index, according to School Board member Todd Price, the board's legislative liaison. However, the funding from the legislature, they said, is now coming up short.

The state, they said, promised districts 42% reimbursement to fund special education. Weiss said the state is now estimating a 35% reimbursement.

"A year ago, the reimbursement rate was around 33% and we received about 30%. With part of the new budget, they took it up to 42%. We budgeted for 39% knowing that -- with the sum-certain nature of the budget -- that's what we could expect, and then 45% the following year," said Weiss. "But if it doesn't follow, then we're down the next year, too."

"We pledged to give that CPI to the teachers," Price said. "We're fulfilling our commitment. But when the state legislature doesn't keep their promise, that's what makes it frustrating."

Price, who serves on the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, said many districts have had to go to referendum for operations. The association approved an emergency resolution last week calling for the legislature to keep its promise in raising the reimbursement to 45%.

"It was an emergency resolution because a lot of districts like ours were caught by surprise," said Price. "It's not like Kenosha is on an island."

"Most likely, to be honest, we're going to have to deficit spend, which is going to create more cuts the following year," Price said, adding the board would likely be using its reserves to plug its deficits in addition to any potential cuts.

If it came to cuts, that means looking at the classroom.

“So that would be raising class sizes, reducing course offerings and we’d also look at major maintenance and the budget, in general,” Weiss said. Technology – from Chromebooks for students to smart boards— would also feel the effects.

While the district has not proposed another referendum – voters turned down one worth $115 million a year ago – that would be a possible discussion. While other large Wisconsin school districts including Madison, Milwaukee, Racine and Janesville have passed referenda, Kenosha has not.

“With that state funding formula for state aid and as with other communities, it’s not only your valuation, but how much you spend,” said Weiss. “So, as communities around us pass large referenda and we don’t do that, that also reduces the amount of state aid we get.”

1,500 Kenosha Unified students perform at 67th annual Band-O-Rama