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Raise taxes to save schools

Education is hurting, but reform's off the table

by Ruth Conniff

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Back when Obama was running for president and Wisconsin Democrats were poised to take over the state Legislature, I went to a fundraiser filled with fired-up activists at Ground Zero coffeehouse on Willy Street.

The issue was schools, and Democratic lawmakers Sondy Pope-Roberts of Middleton and Mark Pocan of Madison were on hand to explain how things could really begin to change once the Dems took over the Legislature.

We could get rid of revenue caps that cause annual rounds of school cuts, and referendum campaigns that pit disgruntled property taxpayers against kids whose schools are on the chopping block. Both legislators promised that education would be a top priority and painted a picture of good days ahead.

Fast-forward to this week. The Madison school district just announced that it is considering drastic cuts — including eliminating my kids' elementary school altogether. Instead of Madison's north side having several small neighborhood schools with low student-teacher ratios, there would be one big building with 1,000 mostly low-income kids. This idea is so lousy school board members renounced it.

Once again, the schools face a political and budgetary crisis, and Madison is looking at more deep and painful cuts. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* this week reported that Gov. Doyle has quietly dropped his proposal for school finance reform. The fired-up activists who attended that coffee-shop pep rally are feeling mighty discouraged.

"I worked my butt off to get Democrats elected, and now they say we can't do anything," says Robert Godfrey, a neighbor of mine who writes a [blog about Madison public schools](#).

Thomas J. Mertz, a board member of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, agrees. "There is no shortage of better ways to allocate and distribute the money," he told me. "There is a shortage of courage to get the revenue."

As Godfrey and Mertz see it, the Democrats are too concerned about holding onto their majority in the Capitol to propose the kinds of revenue-generating solutions that could antagonize voters in swing districts and cost the party seats.

Mertz describes a recent panel in which Pope-Roberts and state Sen. John Erpenbach described the problem schools faced and "said all the right things." Pope-Roberts even told assembled school supporters, "We need people like you to hold our feet to the fire." But then, Mertz says, she added, "but not until after November."

Rep. Pocan sounded weary when I reached him. He had just come from a showdown with Madison school board members, who told him to "show courage." School supporters are up in arms. "Tell me about it!" he says. "We finally get the majority, and it's in a nationally historic downturn."

Pocan takes a swipe at the "amazing lack of understanding of the funding formula by the school board and even the superintendent." And he compares the school funding formula in Wisconsin to an afghan: "If you pull one thread it affects lots of others."

The only time the Democrats have managed to change the formula, he says, they had enough money to "buy off" wealthier districts that lost state funds. Pocan quotes Prof. Andrew Reschovsky, an economist at the La Follette Institute, who says "in order to change the formula and do it right it would cost at least \$1 billion."

Pocan bashes Gov. Doyle for refusing to raise tax revenues, even by addressing a "boondoggle" like sales tax exemptions. "It's easy to say 'they should have done this,' but the reality is it's impossible to do something without having *any* revenue," he says.

If we can't address the crisis now, I ask, then when? Pocan cites evidence that the national economy will be better by the second half of 2011.

So who is right? Are the state Dems too politically cowardly to fix the schools? Or do education activists and school board members just not get it that we are in a major economic crisis and there's no money?

Since everyone I spoke with praised Andrew Reschovsky, I put the question to him.

"I agree with both sides," he says. "It is really hard politically. But in order to prevent a real disaster in K-12 funding we're going to need to raise taxes."

In fact, Reschovsky projects the state will have a huge budget gap for 2011-2013; it will need big tax increases just to stay where it is now. And "The economic prospects for the state are glum without a growing, well-educated workforce."

Sooner or later, that's the case activists and Democrats are going to have to make.

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