



GUEST OPINION

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School funding overdue as political games linger

By Mike Owen

School districts across Iowa certified budgets last week without knowing how much they would have to spend.

Contracts are being negotiated and budgets adopted while state legislators haggle over a number on state school aid that by law was supposed to have been set 14 months ago.

The districts had no choice. State law sets an April 15 deadline to approve school budgets that begin July 1. Legislators are supposed to give them the information to do so well in advance — by mid- to late February of the previous year.

Some lawmakers dismiss concerns by school boards, superintendents and teachers about school funding — which has lagged costs for many years now — claiming they give schools the “first bite at the apple” when the state budget is set.

But the first bites were long gone before school funding was even considered.

First, \$277 million comes off the top to replace local property taxes due to the massive property tax cut passed two years ago. That’s about \$7 of every \$10 in new revenues that would have been available for all purposes. The property tax benefits go mainly to business, much to big companies that don’t need property-tax breaks but do need educated employees.

Add to this the state’s spending on business subsidies and lawmakers’ refusal to close corporate tax loopholes that cost \$60 million to \$100 million a year, and it’s not hard to see who really gets to gnaw at the apple before schools.

In the meantime, local schools built their budgets, not knowing (or being able to tell taxpayers) how close to reality they would come.

How does that work?

School districts will only spend what the Legislature and Governor permit. That’s one number they don’t have. The revenues are a mix of state aid and property tax.

Many school districts will have passed a higher property tax levy than they want because of the uncertainty on state aid. This is because they cannot raise a levy once it’s been approved, but can lower it. So, they assume the worst on property tax, and can lower it if state aid comes in higher than they project.

Without the budget numbers from Des Moines, district residents learned little at local budget public hearings. Teachers and boards have had to work on new contracts in the dark, and staffing for fall classes can be in doubt.

Some districts already are planning to issue pink slips to teachers even though they hope to keep them — hardly an optimal practice for anyone, especially teachers.

So, schools will have budgets, but these won't necessarily reflect the learning strategies that boards and administrators believe are needed to promote student achievement. Budgets certainly won't address now-chronic funding lapses by the state.

Oh, and these budgets might raise property taxes — ironic, because property-tax-cut legislation drives some of this.

Funding decisions? Overdue. Budgets? On time.

Political games? Still going, as scheduled.

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