

## The Predictable Editorial Drumbeat

by George Lightbourn

As a species, we thrive on predictability. We're not fond of big surprises or radical course corrections. So it was comforting when both of the editorial boards of the state's two major dailies – *the Wisconsin State Journal* and *the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* – recently made their pitch for a redesign of the school finance formula. This is the formula that tells the state treasurer how to divide the \$4.6 billion state government makes available to schools.

Somehow the new session of the legislature couldn't officially commence until the editorial writers made their predictable plea to scrap the current school aid formula and start over. "Don't tinker," they said. A whole new approach is needed. Oh, and while you are at it, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* suggested putting a brake on the racing health care costs that schools pay.

The editorial writers have been cajoling governors and legislators to change the formula for years, at least as long as the current formula has been in place. Yet all they have to show for their efforts is a stack of task force reports showing how hard it is to change the formula.

Those who have plunged headfirst into a formula change quickly discover two major hurdles. First, school finance is rooted in the state's constitution and a series of court interpretations of that document. Second, the ever-present computer printout boldly reveals winners and losers that result from any formula change. No elected official ever saw it as their job to create losers. Unable to breach these hurdles, task forces have waived the white flag and have meekly drafted another report to be added to the stack. And the current formula continues on.

The current outcry from the editorial writers is a response to the way the state-imposed spending limits are affecting schools. They seem to embrace the notion of spending limits, but blanch at the reality of limits. They witness every school board struggling with budget realities. They have had to make difficult decisions in order to stay within their budgets. Staff cuts, especially among teachers, have seemed particularly difficult. There isn't a school district in Wisconsin that would testify they don't have difficult decisions to make in putting together budgets.

In recent years, as school boards have had to cut staff, the outcry for change has become louder. It is exacerbated by the souring of some of the ingredients that go into the school aid formula. Health care costs continue an upward climb, enrollments in many districts are declining and property values have begun to flatten.

If the legislature follows their playbook, look for a few patches to be applied to school funding, but also look for the formula to emerge from the current legislative session largely intact.

So is there no change in the future for school finance? Yes, but probably not through the legislative process. As has been written before in this space, the most likely push for school finance reform will come through the court system. It is only a matter of time before the education community marshals its forces and challenges the formula in court. Whether that will result in a change in school finance will probably be determined this spring when the tilt of the Supreme Court is decided at the ballot box. But, even if there is a challenge to the system of school finance, it will take considerable time to wend its way through the court system.

So don't look for any changes in school finance any time soon. I suspect we have one or two more rounds of school finance editorializing before anything happens, either in the legislature or the court. One thing is certain, when change does come, it will require us to pay higher taxes.