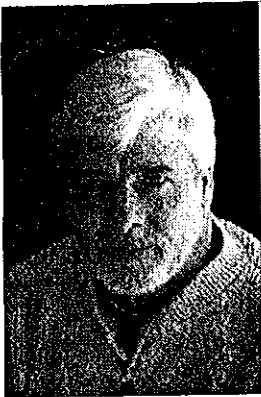


VIEWPOINT

Sewer rats, pumpkin pie and chickens



Letter from the Editor

I spoke recently with a school official about the Florence County district's financial future. Inevitably, talk turned to the state's school funding formula, a construct reviled by professional educators across the state.

Even many lawmakers – state Rep. Jeff Mursau and state Sen. Jim Holperin among them – know the formula is detrimental to schools in their districts.

So is it not reasonable to assume that one day lawmakers could muster the political will to enact reform?

"Sure, and one day sewer rats could taste like pumpkin pie," the school official remarked.

No one I've spoken to in the last several years believes Republicans or Democrats are remotely interested in tackling school finance reform. A few politicians talk a good game, and they've even helped pry loose some transportation and sparsity aid for rural districts. Yet as Florence and other Northwoods districts are awarded thousands in special aid, the state formula is stripping away millions. Florence, for instance, is losing 15 percent annually in equalization funding.

In 2005-06, the first year of the referendum to exceed revenue caps, state equalization aid to Florence amounted to \$2.65 million. In 2009-10, the last year of the referendum, equalization aid is

projected at \$1.375 million, a 52 percent drop in five years. Under the current scenario, the slashing will continue until Florence receives next to nothing from Madison. Nearly the entire burden of funding the school will rest with local taxpayers even as the state doles out billions to educate children in other parts of Wisconsin.

And remember the promise those many years ago for the state to fund two-thirds (66.67 percent) the cost of public education? In Florence County, it funds 29 percent. So much for promises.

In an ironic twist, Florence receives less and less state money because it ostensibly is property rich. At the same time, the state recently gave the elementary school a Wisconsin School of Promise designation, because, among other criterion, so many pupils here come from impoverished homes.

The current state aid formula was fashioned in the early 1990s. Like a new

automobile, it worked great for a while, but it never was engineered for 17 years of service. Now it's breaking down like the rusted out clunker it is.

During the same expanse of years, observers say, Madison has grown into a more polarized, partisan place. Increasingly, ideological purity and party loyalty trump pragmatism and problem solving. Politicians just aren't interested in tackling big problems in a bi-partisan way. They're interested in the next election cycle, pinning blame, raising money, training campaign attack machines on adversaries and sliming rivals with distortions and fear mongering. In Madison, political courage has migrated to parts unknown.

When will it return?

When sewer rats taste like pumpkin pie?

No, when politicians stop acting like chickens.

Letters to the Editor

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