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Bill in Congress could supply \$400 million to save state educators' jobs

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Wisconsin's schools chief ramped up lobbying efforts Tuesday for a \$23 billion education jobs bill pending in Washington that could stave off teacher layoffs next year.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers said that if the bill passes Congress, it could bring more than \$400 million to Wisconsin in extra stimulus funding, enough to save thousands of full-time teaching positions across the state next school year.

"We're in a desperate situation here," Evers said. "It's a one-year fix, but it's a fix worth pursuing."

The severity of educator layoffs is worse in other parts of the country. Cleveland Public Schools, with about 50,000 students, is expecting to lay off 545 teachers and 100 principals. In Atlanta, the 90,000-student Fulton County School System might have to cut about 1,000 jobs, including close to 500 teaching positions.

Milwaukee Public Schools, with about 85,300 students, has proposed comparatively more layoffs than any other district in the state: 850 employees, including around 150 to 200 teachers.

Elsewhere in Wisconsin, proposed job cuts are less severe. The Appleton Area School District may have to eliminate about 50 positions, most of them teachers. The School District of Beloit is looking at 12 staff cuts, Beloit Education Association President Tim Vedra said Tuesday.

The Keep our Educators Working Act was proposed by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) last month, and it's nearly identical to a bill passed by the House in December 2009 to save jobs in the K-12 and higher education arenas. The Senate did not pass that bill.

The provision for \$23 billion via the Education Jobs Fund in the legislation proposed by Harkin - who chairs the Senate Health, Education and Pensions Committee, and another Senate subcommittee that oversees education spending - could be used for salaries and benefits for existing staff or to hire new staff or to provide on-the-job training.

Harkin's legislation would act a lot like the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, which provided \$100 billion for education in 2009 and 2010 under the federal stimulus, but which is drying up at the end of this school year.

Evers said he did not know the total number of teacher and school staff layoffs proposed in Wisconsin, nor the exact number of jobs the potential \$415 million could save. But it would be a lot, he said.

"We're in a position now to stave off potentially thousands of layoffs in the state and work with our colleges and state and federal government to improve our economy," Evers said during a conference call with reporters Tuesday.

Evers said states would receive the education-jobs money directly and wouldn't have to compete for it, as in the process required by other federal education initiatives such as the Race to the Top grant program. But there's still some question as to how it would be given to districts.

In one version of the bill, the money would be doled out through a formula that sends more funding to districts with higher numbers of poor students, Evers said. In another, the DPI would have more flexibility in awarding money to school districts.

"There are arguments for both sides, but my preference is that the ability to be more flexible would serve schools better," Evers said.

'It's not free money'

Ultimately, the federal money in question would have to be paid back by either current or future taxpayers, and that may give some members of Congress pause in approving the bill.

"Clearly, it's not free money," said Dale Knapp, research director for the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. "On one hand, it may save some jobs. On the other hand, if it comes from, say, borrowing from future taxpayers, most economic models say that that may ultimately slow economic growth and come at the cost of higher taxes and possibly private sector job losses because of that slower economic growth."

Although the stimulus for education jobs is intended to allow the economy more time to bounce back, Knapp said there's no way to know for sure if that will happen by 2012. Overall, general aid to school districts decreased by \$147 million in 2009-'10 as the state struggled with revenue shortfalls as a result of the global economic downturn.

Evers acknowledged Tuesday that the new education-jobs stimulus would be a band-aid, but said it would also give him more time to work on proposals for improving the way schools are funded in Wisconsin. He was not ready to release details of those proposals Tuesday.

To encourage support for the bill, Evers said he had notified all superintendents of school districts in Wisconsin. Meanwhile, the state PTA and teachers unions are getting the word out to their members to contact their federal representatives.

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