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Campaign urges one-cent sales tax increase to fund education

Enthusiasm for issue is weak, as lawmakers cite unemployment concerns

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After Arizona voters and Kansas lawmakers approved one-cent sales tax increases for their states, supporters of a similar measure to help pay for schools in Wisconsin are wondering whether it can happen here.

The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools' "[A Penny for Kids](#)" campaign calls for increasing the statewide sales tax to 6% from 5% to help send more than \$800 million more a year to public schools. The initiative was launched in response to cutbacks in state school aid in the 2009-'11 budget and continued pressure for school finances posed by revenue caps.

Furthermore, given that the state relied heavily on federal stimulus dollars to meet its obligations to education in its biennial budget, Wisconsin schools could be in trouble as soon as the 2011-'12 school year unless the state finds another funding source.

"For us, it's all about trying to do something about the immediate crisis," said Tom Beebe, WAES executive director.

But the effort has had trouble finding enthusiasm among legislators, who say it's the wrong time to raise taxes in an economic climate with so many people out of work.

"I think it's got two chances: slim and none," state Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon) said. "And I think slim just left town."

Even Democratic state Sen. John Lehman, a former teacher who is chairman of the Senate's Education Committee, said he couldn't support such a measure now.

"We are struggling," the Racine legislator said. "The citizens are struggling with unemployment and the government is struggling with revenue sources and, generally at that time, to move toward a new revenue source is problematic."

But Beebe said recent sales-tax successes elsewhere show that people can get behind paying more for vital services such as public education.

Arizona's case, where residents voted 64% to 36% in favor of a temporary sales tax to raise \$1 billion annually for schools and other essential services, is encouraging to Beebe and others who support an education sales tax in Wisconsin. About two-thirds of the proceeds from the Arizona tax is slated to go to K-12 education.

Last week, Kansas' governor signed into law a one-cent temporary sales tax increase that is expected to raise more than \$300 million a year and prevent any more immediate cuts to educational funding in that state.

"It's not outside the realm of possibility, no matter what the legislators tell us or tell you," Beebe said.

But Wisconsin lawmakers say there are important differences between the three states.

For one, while state school aid dropped by \$147 million between the 2008-'09 and 2009-'10 school years in Wisconsin, funding to Arizona schools had dropped by \$240 million over the past two years.

In addition, the portion of the sales tax dedicated to Kansas' K-12 schools was only enough to keep it from making more staff reductions than the 2,500 licensed personnel who are likely to be laid off as a result of last year's cuts, said Dale Dennis, Kansas' deputy education commissioner.

State Rep. Robin Vos (R-Racine) also pointed out that Arizona already spends far below what Wisconsin does on K-12 schools. He said that instead of looking for ways to raise even more money for schools, the state needs to explore how to help schools control their costs.

"I would rather have a discussion about systemic reform," Vos said. "I think we could create a system (that is) more fair, based on needs rather than economic circumstances."

Beebe agreed the state needs to do something to make sure the money it spends on schools is getting to those areas with the most pressing needs. But he pointed out that his organization has been pushing for such a broad approach for years with little result in Madison.

The penny sales tax can help fund schools until a more permanent solution is hammered out, Beebe said.

"What I hope will happen is that we've met the crisis and kind of put up a red flag for a while," he said.

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