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 Education

Election 2010

# Education issue looms large in governor's race

## Next governor could have big effect on schools, taxing, spending

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Education may not be the first thing that comes to voters' minds this year when they think of the Wisconsin governor's race, but maybe it should be.

After all, soon after the next governor raises his hand to take the oath of office, he is likely to immediately be confronted with the state's 2011-'13 biennial budget and a shortfall of about \$3 billion.

Education now consumes more than half of the spending by the State of Wisconsin - school aid for kindergarten through 12th grades alone cost about \$5 billion this year - even though the state's portion of education funding has fallen in the last two years and has needed help from federal stimulus dollars.

So, whoever voters select for the state's top spot could have a big effect on their neighborhood schools as well as on state taxing and spending.

"It's huge," Todd Berry, president of the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, said about the school funding issue. "By mathematical definition, if the state has big financial problems, it has real implications for education."

Education has declined as a priority for Wisconsin voters over the last decade as pocketbook issues such as jobs have taken a larger role, said Wendy Scattergood, a professor and pollster at St. Norbert College in De&enspPere.

But Scattergood said education is still a significant issue for voters of both parties, with Democrats focusing on funding for schools and GOP voters emphasizing other aspects such as choice schools.

Those involved in educational advocacy say they think school issues affect pocketbook concerns, too. After all, providing students with an education also means giving them better chances at gaining jobs and giving businesses an opportunity to improve the economy, they say.

In addition, cutting dollars to schools probably would lead to property tax increases because it would leave more room to raise them under state-imposed revenues caps for schools, said Sheri Krause, a spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

Leaders need to remember that educated workers are crucial to the long-term health of the state's economy, she said.

"We're looking at the jobs that are going to be there in 20 or 30 years, and they're demanding more and more skills," Krause said.

## **Where they stand**

Although they have not spoken as vocally or as often about education as they have about the economy or jobs in this election cycle, the two leading candidates for governor have given the outlines of how they would handle funding and other issues facing schools.

Democratic candidate Tom Barrett has said he will do everything he can to ensure K-12 education funding is not reduced further than it has been, although he cautioned, "I can't guarantee anything."

He criticized Republican opponent Scott Walker for proposing tax cuts that he said will almost certainly further decrease state spending on schools.

"With a \$3 billion structural deficit and his proposal that would add \$2.3 billion to that structural deficit, mathematically it's impossible, it's impossible that he will achieve what he's promising voters he will achieve and not decimate education," Barrett said.

Walker called Barrett's charge "100% wrong," saying that some of his proposed tax cuts would be phased in and wouldn't have an effect on the next budget. He also said he would recommend the immediate implementation of tax cuts for small businesses, which would pay for themselves by spurring the economy and increasing revenue to the state.

Walker said he'd like to "maintain support" for schools. He also has suggested giving school boards the ability to control their costs through restoring limits on teacher compensation, switching to the state's health care plan, allowing arbitrators to compare public employee compensation with private sector employees' and escaping unfunded state mandates.

"You get that under control, that means more dollars stay in the classroom," Walker said.

Walker also supports lifting the cap on the number of students who can attend private schools in Milwaukee using tax-paid vouchers, a move that his opponent said is currently unnecessary.

For his part, Barrett has proposed changing the state's funding formula to make income a factor in how the state distributes aid and guarantee base funding for districts with declining enrollment.

He said he would delay implementation of those changes until the state could increase overall funding so that no school districts would lose state support as a result of the changes.

"I think it's going to have to be done in the context of getting additional dollars into the system," Barrett said.

As for improving school quality, Walker has introduced a plan that would grade schools on a variety of indicators, with persistently failing schools required to choose from a number of options - from laying off administrators and school staff to closing - in exchange for resources and support.

He also favors rating teachers, with bonuses for those with higher scores and licensure revocation for those rated "ineffective" two years in a row.

"It's not just for challenges that are taking place in MPS," Walker said. "I just think that there are a lot of strengths in education across the state.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp; The challenge is we've just got gaps, district by district."

Barrett has said he would work with state schools Superintendent Tony Evers to address the gap in academic performance between Wisconsin students of different races, which is the largest in the nation. He said that will include efforts that he championed as Milwaukee's mayor by providing programming for students when they aren't in school, primarily during the summer.

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