

Chalkboard: Budget anxieties fuel layoff plans and rumors

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Gov. Scott Walker's secrecy and rhetoric regarding his budget plans are fueling rumors and anxiety as well as a flurry of preliminary teacher layoff notices in school districts around the state.

In Dane County, the Belleville school board voted to send layoff notices to 19 staff members at a meeting on Monday. Both the Madison and Middleton Boards of Education will meet Friday to determine their options and if they will also need to send out layoff notices, given the dire predictions of the governor's budget which will be announced March 1.

In Madison, hundreds of teachers could receive layoff notices, district officials confirmed. Superintendent Daniel Nerad called it an option that would provide "maximum flexibility under the worst case scenario" in an e-mail sent to board members Thursday evening.

Most districts are bracing, and planning, for that worst case scenario.

On Thursday in Hustisford, in Dodge County, all teachers, including the wife of Republican Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, received preliminary notifications from the school board that they face layoffs when the budget is presented next week and its impact is assessed.

There's been little official information revealed about what Walker's austere budget will include but local communities are full of anxieties and rumors.

A Capitol staffer who asked not to be named said most Capitol insiders agree that predictions of a drop of about \$900 million in state aid to K12 public schools as well as permitted revenue limits of negative \$500 per student are probably correct. The drop in both state aid and the reduction in revenue limits per student is without precedent. In the past, revenue limits per student have annually increased by about \$200 each year.

In Milwaukee, school district officials have heard that the governor is also considering refusing federal Title 1 funds aimed at helping poor children in state schools. For this school year, Milwaukee has received almost \$77.5 million in Title 1 funding. The possibility that the governor is considering rejecting the federal money created quite a ruckus in Milwaukee when it was suggested by Milwaukee's School Board President Michael Bond earlier this week and reported [here](#) by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

I spoke with another Milwaukee board member, Larry Miller, on Wednesday to try to get a sense of how likely this scenario is and what the possible rationale would be for turning back funds that benefit education for poor kids.

"How many of our schools are high poverty and rely on Title 1 for services to help educate poor kids? All of them," says Miller. "Refusing Title 1 funds would totally devastate our district," he said during a telephone interview from Milwaukee.

"First the governor wants to take away healthcare for poor kids through cuts to Badgercare and then there's this talk that he'd send back Title 1 funds for their education," Miller says. "It's outrageous."

Title 1 is the nation's oldest program that provides federal dollars to help poor children improve academic performance.

According to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data, about \$17.5 million in Title 1 money is helping educate poor children in private schools in Wisconsin for the 2010-2011 school year out of a total of over \$188 million sent to Wisconsin for schools across the state.

Most of the money is used to hire additional staff to provide intensive small group instruction and academic services for students who are struggling with math and reading, spokesman John Johnson of the Department of Public Instruction said.

"I couldn't understand why on earth the governor would send back federal money for schools to help poor kids until I was in Madison on Saturday and I talked to someone from the tea party. She basically opposes all federal spending on education," Miller told me.

"No one knows what the final budget is going to look like, or whether Title 1 will be rejected or not. I am confident saying that there have been conversations at the highest level considering rejecting Title 1 money for high poverty schools."

A look at some of the conservative think tanks that appear to have created much of the play book for Walker's agenda show that rejecting Title 1 money would be consistent with conservative philosophy.

For example, in an [article for the Cato Institute in 2004](#), Neal McCluskey wrote an article titled "No Federal Failure Left Behind." He writes, "No matter how you look at it, federal involvement in education has been a failure.

Rejecting Title 1 would not only devastate Milwaukee schools and neighborhoods, but would also have a significant impact on other high poverty urban districts like Racine, Beloit and Kenosha, according to Miller. Many poor rural districts across the state would suffer, as well. Madison, with 19 elementary schools that have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged kids, would also lose about \$5.5 million.

Many parts of the governor's budget repair bill and budget have Madison School Board member Lucy Mathiak worried, too.

"I'm absolutely baffled by what good could possibly come from rejecting federal money that helps our neediest students and schools. The reasoning escapes me," Mathiak told me when we spoke Wednesday.

"We want to help kids fulfill their potential and become well-educated, successful members of society and we take away the tools that help our schools do that? It would be absolutely nuts."

Mathiak, who has a reputation as a budget hawk, wrote this week on the [School Information System website](#) about why she stands by Madison's teachers in protesting Walker's budget repair bill and its demand for public employees to give up collective bargaining rights.

"This budget hawk believes that SB11 is draconian, malicious and counterproductive to the goals the governor claims that he wants to achieve. I do not believe that it is necessary to end the right to bargain anything but wages in order to close Wisconsin's budget gap. I also know that the gap is less than we were led to believe (unless we are now saying that the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau is a tool of union sympathizers.

I do not believe that the proposal to recertify collective bargaining organizations each year will enhance productivity or come without significant costs in conducting and verifying certification results. And I am stumped as to how turning back federal funds for Title 1 (aid to schools with high levels of poverty) will in any way improve schools or close the budget gap," she writes.