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Programs may suffer

Mar 24, 2008 - 04:05:04 CDT

By DALE WETZEL
Associated Press Writer

When North Dakota lawmakers have earmarked state aid for local schools, money often has been left after the bills are paid. That may not be the case next year, and some education programs could be shortchanged as a result.

Wayne Sanstead, North Dakota's superintendent of public instruction, warned school superintendents about the possibility in a letter last week, and the chairman of the Senate Education Committee suggested that lawmakers may want to make up the difference.

"Projections at this point indicate a very tight budget, lowering the likelihood that contingency funding will be available for distribution," Sanstead's letter said.

Most of North Dakota's state aid to education is distributed according to each school's enrollment, using forecasts provided by the Department of Public Instruction.

The Legislature specifies the amount of money schools receive for each student over two years. The current figure is \$3,250 per student, and it is scheduled to rise to \$3,325 this fall.

The payment is adjusted using several factors, including each school's size, its remoteness, and the number of students it has who need special education. During the 2007 Legislature, lawmakers estimated it would take \$726.2 million over two years to make the aid payments they were promising.

In recent years, the Department of Public Instruction's forecasts have overshot the number of students who enrolled. That meant there was money left over after the expected per-student payments were made.

Legislators have grown accustomed to the surplus and have included instructions in school spending bills about how it should be handled. During the 2005-07 budget cycle, the surplus was about \$14 million; in the two years before that, it was roughly \$3 million.

Last year, the Legislature's education aid bill anticipated a surplus of at least \$3.75 million and directed that it be spent on four initiatives. The first \$1 million must be used to help pay districts' special education expenses, the law says.

Sanstead said the Department of Public Instruction expects the amount of leftover money to be only \$700,000, although he said the final numbers won't be known until November.

"Clearly, I think (legislators) acted from the perspective that it had been there before, and there were some funds available for use," Sanstead said in an interview. "They anticipated the same to be true this time."

Legislators say the financial projections indicate North Dakota's new formula for distributing aid to local schools, which was crafted by the Legislature last year, is more efficient at distributing education dollars.

New subsidies for all-day kindergarten, which take effect during the 2008-09 school year, also are expected to intensify demands for education money this fall.

At present, state assistance is paid only for half-day kindergarten, and the change has prompted a number of school districts to consider offering full-day programs.

Sen. Layton Freborg, R-Underwood, the chairman of the Senate Education Committee, said he would be likely to support providing the \$3.75 million in contingency spending anyway. The Legislature, when it meets next year, could include the money in an emergency budget bill, he said.

Aside from the \$1 million in special education aid, the list includes \$2 million for regional education associations, \$550,000 for remedial English instruction, and \$200,000 for adult education programs.

North Dakota's treasury could include more than \$600 million in reserves when lawmakers meet next year, the state budget office estimates.

"There's going to be such a scramble for those dollars, you wouldn't believe it," Freborg said. "We may just as well direct some of it at those people that kind of were promised it."

Rep. RaeAnn Kelsch, R-Mandan, the chairwoman of the House Education Committee, said the relatively small amount of expected leftover education aid shows the state's new formula for distributing it is working more efficiently.

In the future, legislators should be more cautious about assuming there will be leftover funds, Kelsch said.

"We can't be looking at, there's going to be contingency fund dollars. You can't count on that," Kelsch said. "If we're going to fund things, we've got to fund things straight up, and go with it that way."

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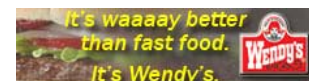
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Sk wrote on Mar 24, 2008 6:29 PM:

" How can we talk about a huge surplus and education funding being cut at the same time??? It is absolutely stupid. We can fund al kinds of wastefull bills and welfare but not education? Maybe if we had better education funding we would not need to fund welfare programs so much! "

Razor's Edge wrote on Mar 24, 2008 4:13 PM:

" The problem with "surpluses" is that it means people were overly taxed. Therefore, the people should get the money back. However, we all know what happens. There's extra money and the politicians spend it, and then next year they say they need even more money. As for the extra 600 million we have, we need to create some laws to protect it before it just "disappears". "



scott wrote on Mar 24, 2008 11:22 AM:

" and oh let's see- what happens to the 600 million saved? Give me a break- this is yet another way that politicians use to scare people into taxes "

If its important than Budget wrote on Mar 24, 2008 9:10 AM:

" It seems that we have budgeted correctly, and the "leftover" slush fund has disappeared. I'm not sure that this is a bad thing. As RaeAnn states, fund it up front. Mr Sanstead: If you fail to budget, its not a shorfall, its "poor planning". Hoping for leftovers is not a sound operating procedure.

I fear that many of our state dept heads see \$\$\$ because of increased oil and coal tax revenue and they are all figuring out how they can get a piece of the pie. I would encourage all elected officials to be vigilant, now more than ever. North Dakota may have a little extra income, but if you look around many states are having financial woes.

Budget the money or leave it in the "bucket". "

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