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## WI school officials critical of federal role in education

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### WPRI survey: School officials say federal rules distort local education policies

*DPI, state officials missing opportunity to gain more spending flexibility*



School leaders throughout Wisconsin say they would prioritize spending differently, steer more money to classrooms and be more innovative were it not for the bureaucratic requirements and perverse incentives associated with federal education funding, according to a survey conducted by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

The survey, conducted during July and August, found that nearly 60 percent of local school officials who responded agree that, "Restrictions on how federal funds are spent harmfully distort the decisions that local school officials make on behalf of their students."

Additionally, 82 percent of local superintendents, 74 percent of business managers and 67 percent of school board members think there are "too many restrictions" on how local districts can spend federal funds.

State policy-makers and Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Superintendent Tony Evers have a unique opportunity to provide local school officials with more flexibility through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). But Evers has effectively assumed control of the plan — and Republican legislators have not interfered — meaning that school officials likely will be trapped in the status quo when the Sept. 18 deadline passes for Wisconsin's ESSA plan to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

"In addition to complex regulations, bureaucratic hurdles and hidden costs, federal funds also compel local school officials to make decisions they wouldn't make otherwise," said Dan Benson, editor of WPRI's Project for 21st Century Federalism and co-author of two new articles on the survey results (see [here](#) and [here](#)). "School officials who responded to our survey indicate that these decisions often come at the expense of students, teachers and staff."

The survey found more than 87 percent of superintendents and 81 percent of school board members and business managers responding said their schools would be more likely to "implement innovative ideas" to improve their districts and education for their students if they had more discretion over how federal funds are spent.

Those innovations would likely benefit students and teachers directly, the survey indicates, with nearly 81 percent of superintendents, 66 percent of school board members and nearly 57 percent of business managers saying they would redirect funds to teachers and classrooms if they could.

Paperwork and other red tape associated with federal funding are also an issue for school officials. Almost 60 percent said federal paperwork takes teachers and staff away from students and the classroom. Two-thirds rated federal reporting requirements imposed on their districts as "extremely" or "very" time-consuming.

About a third of local school officials who responded to the survey said their districts had hired staff specifically to manage federal grants or that they would if they could afford to do so. Even among those who said their existing staff is managing the workload, many said completing paperwork related to federal funding often causes staff to

work overtime.

Nearly 75 percent of superintendents said federal regulations "do very little to support the necessary oversight and accountability of public schools." A majority of school board members and business managers agreed.

*More survey results, responses and analysis are available [here](#) and [here](#). Permission to reprint is granted as long as the authors and WPRI are properly cited.*

#### **About the survey**

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute in July and August of 2017 surveyed local school superintendents, school board members and business managers in all 424 Wisconsin public school districts to get their opinions on federal funding of local schools. Of 410 superintendents contacted, 119 (29 percent) completed the survey; of 2,058 school board members, 258 (12 percent) responded; of 223 business managers, 74 (33.2 percent) responded. All told, 451 out of 2,691 officials responded to the survey — a 16.9 percent response rate. The survey was conducted through Survey Monkey and sent to officials via email. The questions were multiple choice, but respondents were given the opportunity to comment. Their answers and comments were anonymous unless the respondents gave permission that their names and titles be used for publication. Some were contacted by phone and email for additional comments. The full survey results will be published this fall.