

Underly pushes back against GOP demands on spending COVID-19 funds

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State Superintendent Jill Underly is firing back at the Joint Finance Committee co-chairs over their “disappointing, disingenuous, and nakedly political letter” demanding her agency propose a new plan to direct \$77 million in COVID-19 funds to districts that provided in-person learning.

Responding to a letter from Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, and Sen. Howard Marklein, R-Spring Green, Underly wrote late yesterday they had “numerous warnings” that their proposal for the disputed ARPA funds conflicted with guidance from the U.S. Department of Education.

She accused them of forcing “DPI and our schools into a game of high-stakes chicken. And you lost.”

Of the \$1.5 billion in ARPA funds Wisconsin allocated, about \$1.4 billion was divided up according to a federal formula that takes poverty into account. That directed the bulk of the money to larger districts such as Milwaukee.

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The GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee reworked DPI’s plan for the rest of the money. That included the now-disputed \$77 million that was directed to districts that provided in-person instruction for at least 50 percent of the 2020-21 school year. The committee’s approach also gave priority to small, rural districts for the funds.

The federal government had indicated the money should be used for learning loss, after-school programs and summer school to address the disproportionate impact of

COVID-19 on underrepresented student groups such as those who are homeless or are in foster care. At the time, the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau said it was unclear whether the committee's proposal for the money would meet the federal requirements. Still, the agency also noted the Biden administration's guidance on the COVID-19 funds had been constantly evolving.

The U.S. Department of Education signed off on the bulk of the state's plan, but placed a hold on the \$77 million.

Born and Marklein have called the decision political and accused DPI and the Evers administration of working with the federal government to reject the GOP proposal. In their letter yesterday, they demanded Underly immediately put together an alternative plan that would meet their legislative intent.

In her response, Underly wrote her staff has been working with the lawmakers' aides in past weeks to keep them apprised of the situation and she is willing to work with the legislators on a path forward. But "the political nonsense needs to stop."

See Underly's letter:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/211209DPI.pdf>

See the co-chairs' letter:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/211209Letter.pdf>