SPECIAL REPORT

Educational budget shortfalls decades in the making

By Jonathan Stefonek
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As school districts across Wisconsin grapple with budget shortfalls due to stagnant funding and rising costs, school administrators are faced with few options. Some districts opt to ask taxpayers to contribute more funding through referendums. Others make cuts, and others use one-time funding offerings to balance the budget short-term.

District leaders point to 1993 as the starting point of the budget challenges schools are currently facing.

That year, the Wisconsin State Legislature instituted revenue limits on public schools, McFarland School District business manager Jefferey Mahoney explained, only allowing school districts to raise a certain amount of money from state, federal, and local sources, with each school’s base revenue based on what was happening at that particular moment.

This meant very different things for districts across the state, Lake Mills Area School District superintendent Tony Olson said. “If you were a low-spending district back then and then they came in with those caps, you were done, and that’s what you were locked into,” Olson said.

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CAMBRIDGE NEWS & DEERFIELD INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO

Cambridge-area residents hold signs in 2019 at Cambridge High School in support of protesters marching from Palmyra to Madison in opposition to proposed education funding in the state budget.

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CAMBRIDGE NEWS & DEERFIELD INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO

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