

December 18, 2006

Governor Jim Doyle
P.O. Box 7863
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Governor Doyle,

As you are aware, Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is Wisconsin's designated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities. DRW is a partner in the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES). As you know, among the areas in which we advocate is special education. One thing we have learned is that although special education is seriously underfunded, the solution to that problem cannot be adequately addressed merely by providing additional special education funding (although that is also desperately needed). There are many reasons for this, but chief among them is the simple fact that the vast majority of children who receive special education participate either fully or partially in general education classes and programs. In addition, due to revenue caps, whenever there is a shortfall in one part of the school budget, pressure builds to either deny the right of children with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), or to fund that right by reducing funding to general education programs, which just increases the animosity which many general education parents and teachers already have against children with disabilities and their parents.

Accordingly, in addition to providing additional special education categorical aids (about which I have previously written you), DRW also urges you to provide substantial increases in bilingual programs, transportation, SAGE, for small, rural schools, as well as help for declining enrollment districts. Of course, the state must maintain two-thirds state funding just to keep school districts from closing. As you may be aware, these budget priorities are reflected at some level in the Department of Public Instruction budget and are supported by a new "unity coalition" comprised of WAES, Association for Equity in Funding, Fair Aid Coalition, the Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, the Wisconsin PTA, Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, Wisconsin Education Association Council, School Administrators Alliance, and American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin.

However, DRW views the DPI proposed budget, as merely a stopgap proposal. If you are not ready to propose an overhaul to our school finance system in the upcoming biennial budget, then DRW urges you to include the following provisions in your budget proposal, which are based on the reform plan developed by WAES:

- Transportation—In order to keep up with the rising cost of transportation, Wisconsin needs an increase over the biennium of \$97.7 million.
- Bilingual—In order to keep up with the rising number of children in Wisconsin schools who come from non-English speaking homes, Wisconsin needs an increase over the biennium of \$54.6 million.

- Special education—Due to the tremendous underfunding of special education at both the state and federal level, Wisconsin needs an increase of \$898.7 million over the biennium
- SAGE PLUS— In order to meet its original state purpose, SAGE needs an increase of \$380.3 million over the biennium. WAES calls this SAGE PLUS because the WAES proposal would fund SAGE along the lines of the DPI budget, but then include additional funding of \$300 per year, in all districts, for all subsidized-lunch students.
- Sparsity— In this case WAES plan calls for categorical aid increases over the two years of \$26.5 million which is the same as recommended by DPI.

These emergency funding increases are necessary this year but do not solve the fundamental fiscal problems of school districts—fiscal problems that are causing educational crises. DRW urges you to initiate comprehensive reform of the school-funding system in the 2007-09 legislative session. As a WAES partner, DRW is more than willing to work with you and the Legislature, and other stakeholders to secure short-term stopgap aid increases as well as overall finance system reform.

As a partner in WAES, Disability Rights Wisconsin is committed to fighting for increased categorical aid to address the critical short-term needs in all school districts. At the same time, we urge you to work with us, other education stakeholders, and the Legislature to begin comprehensive reform of the school-funding system in 2007.

Thank you for your support of public education in Wisconsin. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions, or wish to discuss these ideas further.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Spitzer-Resnick
Managing Attorney