



Wisconsin Alliance
for Excellent Schools

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For immediate release

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WAES endorses Burmaster's budget

Partners in the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) have endorsed State Superintendent of Schools Elizabeth Burmaster's 2007-09 budget proposal that asks for an increase in public education spending of over \$600 million, calling it "a recognition that schools are inadequately funded and that the funding system itself doesn't work for all the children of the state."

Citing "a rising inequity in educational opportunity for our children," Burmaster criticized the present school-finance system. "Public education in Wisconsin is threatened," she said bluntly.

Burmaster said rising costs, increasing poverty, and, "most of all, revenue caps are limiting our ability to offer all children the same educational opportunities ... Increasingly, it does matter where you live in our state as to the education opportunities your child receives."

The elected head of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) made her comments in the annual state-of-education assessment before the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators in Madison. She spoke in the Capitol Rotunda.

"The State Superintendent put politics aside and gave an accurate appraisal of the problems communities, schools, parents, and children face," said WAES spokesperson Jay Mitchell, superintendent of the Superior School District. "Teachers are being laid off, class sizes are increasing, programs and services are being cut. Many children are already losing their shot at a successful future, and, unless we do something, many more will suffer."

Mitchell said, "Superintendent Burmaster recognizes that harsh reality and has proposed a budget that begins to put a broken system back together."

Seeking to "lessen the threat to equity in educational opportunities for students across our state," Burmaster started Wisconsin on the road to adequate funding by continuing two-thirds funding through an additional \$422 million in general school aids, sizeable increases in existing categorical aid programs, and the addition of several new programs. Total state aid for education would grow \$662 million during the '07-'09 biennium under her proposal.

Burmaster said that Wisconsin's schools are at a crossroads and it is time to recognize that "the single best investment we can make is in our children." She said, "Those who continue to lead people to believe that public education costs too much must be called to answer, 'What is the cost of failing to prepare every child for the 21st century?'"

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In addition to calling for maintaining the state's commitment to two-thirds funding of education costs, the State Superintendent's budget proposal includes:

- \$26.5 million to help between 170 and 190 small, rural schools where poverty is a factor. This new program applies to school districts with fewer than 2,000 students with a poverty rate of at least 20 percent and with under 15 children per square mile. Burmaster offered this plan in her last budget, but it didn't make the final document. According to a DPI spokesperson, this piece of the budget "recognizes that small, rural schools are the lifeblood of their communities."
- \$75 million increase (over the biennium) in special education funding.
- More revenue is also included to fund school district's transportation costs. Although this categorical aid applies to all districts, it is vitally important to small districts in rural areas. There is an increase from \$180 to \$220 per student reimbursement for those transported over 12 miles. Additionally, the DPI budget refunds to school districts the 31-cent motor fuel tax.
- \$364,000 increase for middle school gifted and talented program grants, doubling the current expenditure.
- \$3 million increase for bilingual programs in schools that already meet the student threshold and another \$6.2 million to go to school districts that offer bilingual programs (about 200) but don't meet the threshold.
- \$21 million to fund the SAGE program for smaller class sizes according to current law which provides a per-student increase to \$2,250.
- An additional \$1.8 million in a health initiative to address the shortage of school nurses.
- An adjustment in state support of the Milwaukee voucher program, relieving Milwaukee property taxpayers of almost \$27 million in taxes.
- Increases in the low-revenue ceiling from \$8,400 to \$8,700 in the first year and to \$9,000 in the second.
- A proposal to increase the current 75 percent hold-harmless for declining enrollment districts (60 percent of the districts in Wisconsin) to 100 percent, and a provision to guarantee that no district receives a lower revenue limit authority than it did in the preceding year.

The State Superintendent's budget also includes incentives for master teachers to work in high-poverty schools; new revenue for K-5 programs in Milwaukee, Beloit, Racine, and Kenosha; nutrition and milk programs in public and private schools; transportation for open enrollment students; after school grants; community-based 4-K programs; and other programs and services. The entire budget and the Superintendent's address can be found at the DPI website at <http://www.dpi.state.us>.

Virginia Wyss, WAES partner and former Janesville School Board president, said, "Those who understand what has happened to public schools and public school students during 13 years of revenue limits owe the State Superintendent a debt of gratitude. She recognizes the significant need of our schools if we want to prepare our young people for the future."

"We need to stand behind her efforts," Wyss said.