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## **Task Force did good things for children, schools**

### **Walk on the Child's Side supports recommendations**

The Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence has redirected Wisconsin's school funding debate in the right direction, by putting the emphasis on adequate funding for academic programs to improve educational opportunities for all Wisconsin children.

The Task Force made its recommendations final at its meeting in Madison on Tuesday, June 22, 2004. A written report, expected by June 30, will end its 10-month assignment.

Most attention will go to the proposed sales-tax-for-property-tax swap, in which increased state sales tax revenue will go to reduce local school property taxes. Underlying the exchange is a call for the state to take more responsibility for educating Wisconsin's nearly 900,000 public school students. As various Task Force members said, the tax exchange is intended to take children out of the property tax political wars.

As the Task Force finished its work, funding-reform advocates from across the state moved closer to the state Capitol as part of the 18-day, 250-mile Walk on the Child's Side. Co-sponsored by Price County Citizens Who CARE and the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES), part of the group's message at a rally will be support of the work of the Task Force. At least one Task Force member will speak at the rally.

Another important Task Force recommendation is to eliminate the QEO (Qualified Economic Offer) restrictions on bargaining rights for teachers. Eliminating QEO will encourage school districts and teachers to be more creative in bargaining, in order to help curtail increasing health care costs and reward teachers with a demonstrated capacity to help children learn.

Beyond those two items, several dozen specific proposals, taken as a group, begin to take the state down the path to adequate funding of public education. The Task Force explicitly called for a "cost out" or "adequacy study" to determine the cost of educating children to state standards. The cost out would use both professional consultants and a broad process of civic engagement.

Other recommendations include substantial increases in funding for three important categorical aid programs, which help schools pay for special education (children with disabilities), teaching English-language learners, and transporting students to and from school (specially important to rural districts).

While the package as a whole falls short of the goals of the WAES coalition, it is a valuable redirection of the state's school-finance discussion heading into the fall elections and the upcoming state budget debate and an important compilation of dozens of excellent programmatic suggestions.

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Parents, students, community members, and educators from all over the state—participants in the *Walk on the Child Side*—will underscore that message, Thursday, June 24, at a rally on the State Street steps of the Capitol and with legislators later in the day.

On June 7, 2004, 150 people gathered in Butternut and started the walk to demonstrate their support for school-funding reform that meets the immediate needs of Wisconsin's children. After 18 days and 250 miles, the walk will arrive in Madison, June 24.

The group's message is that people from small and large, rural and urban school districts across the state are united in their call for reform based on adequate revenue to meet the needs of all children.

Walkers will arrive at Madison East High School, 2222 East Washington Avenue in Madison, at 10 a.m., Thursday, meet hundreds of other supporters, and then finish the *Walk on the Child's Side* by walking to the Capitol for a noon.

Featured speakers include Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton; school district superintendents from Madison, Milwaukee, and White Lake; the presidents of the state's two teachers unions, WEAC and AFT-Wisconsin; students from Milwaukee, White Lake, and Butternut; and others.

Following the rally, people will visit their legislators to talk about the need for a larger investment in public schools and the type of assistance that is needed as soon as possible in many school districts that face even more budget cuts or, in some cases, dissolution.

WAES is a statewide, broad-based coalition working to replace the present system with one that links resources to academic standards and the needs of children.

For more information, go to the website of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools at <http://www.excellentschools.org>, or contact Tom Beebe, Institute for Wisconsin's Future, at 414-384-9094.