



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—April 10, 2006

Stepp's head-in-sand approach ignores school reality, blocks public debate

When more than two dozen state legislators tried to do something to help Wisconsin's public schools with their financial crises, all State Sen. Cathy Stepp (R-Racine) could do was belittle their effort, continuing the head-in-the-sand approach that thinks public education is best served by ignoring its plight.

Last month, 27 legislators introduced Assembly Joint Resolution 94 (AJR 94), calling for changes in the state's public school funding formula. The bill was referred to the Assembly Education Committee, where it sits, untouched, without even a hearing scheduled.

Last Friday, Stepp issued a press release labeling AJR 94 a "full and unconditional surrender in the war of ideas," because it lacks all the specifics one would find in something contained within the state budget.

AJR 94 is an effort to force the debate on school finance reform to begin now, when it's needed. It proposes meaningful ground rules for finance reform, including doing away with "arbitrary" funding levels (such as the current system's reliance on 1993 spending as the basis for revenue limits). It demands funding that is sufficient to meet the special circumstances facing students (such as disabilities or unfamiliarity with English) and districts (such as rural districts with both high poverty and low state aid).

A constructive move for Stepp would be to use her influence to assure a public hearing on AJR 94. There is no shortage of concrete proposals. Some have been well-circulated in Madison; their airing at a legislative hearing would be a step forward in the school-finance debate. Some of the ignored ideas have come from Stepp's Republican colleagues, including Sen. Mike Ellis and former Rep. Mickey Lehman. Others come from Democrats and independent organizations, such as the Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence and the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES). Stepp's don't-bother-me approach has silenced reformers from both parties, undermining her charge that AJR 94 is a partisan gimmick.

Stepp never did anything to create a fair hearing for any of those concrete proposals. Perhaps she was too busy running away from the financial plight of the Racine Unified School District, the largest system in her Senate district and third largest in Wisconsin. Racine schools have been pushed into a series of painful referenda because the state school-aid system forces it to make regular cuts in its staffing, its programming, its building maintenance, its technology modernization and its staff development. Stepp did nothing concrete to help her own constituents.

Racine is not alone. The state's school revenue limits force yearly cuts by holding down revenue growth to less than what's needed just to maintain one year's programs into the next year. For almost every district in the state, allowable revenue increases are lower than what's required by the state's Qualified Economic Offer law. This total system has been creating ever-greater havoc for more than a decade.

All Stepp can offer by way of specifics is "expanding school choice options," which does absolutely nothing for children in the Racine County districts she represents, nor in 425 of the state's 426 school districts.

To learn more about Wisconsin's school finance crisis, including the importance of a hearing on AJR 94, see the WAES website at www.excellentschools.org or call 414-384-9094. The text of AJR 94 is on the site. Stepp's release is at: www.thewheelerreport.com/releases/April06/April17/0407steppideas.pdf.