

School-funding update for week of Oct. 26, 2009

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The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) is a statewide, independent, membership-based organization of educators, school board members, students, parents, community leaders, researchers, citizens, and community activists whose lone goal is the comprehensive reform of Wisconsin's school-funding system. If you would like more information about the organization -- or on becoming part of WAES -- contact Tom Beebe at 920-650-0525 or tbeebe@excellentschools.org.

WAES, others groups criticize Governor's "funding plan"

Governor Jim Doyle released a plan, last week, that would exempt from revenue limits school districts that meet certain criteria (http://www.excellentschools.org/news/PressReleases/govs_release.pdf). In addition, the plan suggested Wisconsin might be ready for a longer school year, longer school days, and many other suggestions to better educate children ... many of them that would, undoubtedly, require additional funding.

WAES was quick to respond

(http://www.excellentschools.org/news/PressReleases/release_Oct_19_09.pdf), thanking the Governor for recognizing the need for change but explaining that his plan failed to address the very real crisis in which our public schools find themselves. "The plan just doesn't get the job done," said Kim Suhr, a WAES board member. While agreeing with other groups that comprehensive reform is needed, WAES stood alone and called for a one-cent increase in the sales tax to deal with the immediate revenue shortfall created for schools in the last state budget.

The School Finance Network (SFN), a statewide coalition to which WAES belongs, carried on the reform theme (http://www.excellentschools.org/news/PressReleases/sfn_release.pdf). SFN pointed out that the Governor's plan does nothing to change the finance system that has led to cuts in programs and services in schools around the state. Jill Gaskell -- a spokesperson for the group, Wisconsin PTA legislative chair, and WAES board member -- explained that "the governor's plan merely speeds the process up" of passing on to local property taxpayers a larger share of the school-funding buck.

Electors saying no to levy hikes resulting from state budget

Electors in at least 10 communities have voted down district budgets that included increased property taxes to fund public schools, delivering their own verdict on a funding system that continues to ask more of them while continuing to lay off staff, increase class sizes, and cut programs and services. School districts,

forced into the situation by legislative inaction on funding reform and legislative action that actually cut aid to schools in the most recent budget, are left grappling with the results as they try to educate children.

After electors in Baraboo voted down a 17-percent mill rate hike school board members went back to the drawing board (<http://www.wiscnews.com/bnr/news/465828>). The recommendation was to draw the shortfall down equally from the tax levy, spending cuts, and using reserves. That would mean a five- to six-percent levy increase. District administrators warned that drawing reserves down too much could reduce the district's bond rating and limit its ability to spend in the future. Associate high school principal Dan Halberg, warning about recommended cuts in his school's supplies budget, said "I just want to give you a picture of what it's going to be like to cut something that has not been increased in over 15 years."

The situation was similar in Tigerton where district residents rejected a 10.41-percent increase in the general fund (<http://www.shawanoleader.com/articles/2009/10/01/news/news4.txt>). "What they (district electors) were telling us ... this was the second year in a row for a 10-percent-plus increase in the levy and with the economy like it is ... they just couldn't take that," said Superintendent Stu Rivard. He complimented those at the annual meeting for expressing their concerns in a civil manner and said he thought the board would come back with a lower tax levy and a plan to use some of its fund balance.

The atmosphere was much more tense in West Bend where about 700 voters responded with hoots and a resounding "no" to 12.1-percent tax levy increase. Although some spoke about their fears about the effect on students, the vast majority didn't mince words in sending the district's proposal back to the drawing board. School board President Joe Carlson warned of dramatic service cuts, particularly in areas not covered by union contracts. The situation in West Bend did bring out the best in a lot of people who attended a meeting in support of a full range of educational opportunities, including the student body as they rallied against further budget cuts (<http://www.fox6now.com/news/witi-091012-west-bend2,0,1555324.story>).

Public, media understand the source of school funding problems

As more and more school districts grapple with increasing property taxes at the same time they are being forced to cut programs and services for kids, more and more groups and media outlets are questioning the school-funding system and state budget that put Wisconsin in this unsustainable situation:

- WAES is a member of the School Finance Network (SFN at <http://www.sfnwisconsin.org>), and the SFN explained their take on the crisis in a recent opinion piece (http://www.excellentschools.org/news/sfn_opinion_pdf.pdf). SFN then weighed in, Friday, when Ken Bates appeared on "Here and Now" on *Wisconsin Public Television* (http://wpt2.org/npa/HAN817_bates.cfm). Bates is superintendent of the Green Lake School District, president of the Fair Aid Coalition, and a long-time member of WAES. Earlier, Bates was on WCLO radio in Janesville as start of the Stan Milam Show (<http://www.wclo.com/podcasts/stan-milam-show/2009/oct/08/school-funding/>).
- An editorial in the *Appleton Post Crescent* (<http://www.postcrescent.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/200910020422/APC0602/910020473>) said no one should be surprised at property tax increases because "the seeds of the increase were planted in February when Gov. Jim Doyle's budget proposal didn't meet the state's commitment to fund two-thirds of K-12 education."
- It's not just happening in a few districts, a column on the website of Advancing Madison's Public Schools talks about (<http://madisonamps.org/2009/10/21/headline-of-the-day-school-budget-decreases-tax-levy-increases/>) program and service cuts -- and property tax increases -- all over the state.

- "The state's decision to end two-thirds funding of public schools resulted in a tax increase for Altoona schools," starts a story in the *Eau Claire Leader Telegram* (http://www.leadertelegram.com/local_news/story/article_01076f79-9251-5785-b382-8393656813a5.html).
- The headline in the *Marshfield News Herald* says it all: Decrease in state aid challenges Marshfield-area school districts (<http://www.marshfieldnewsherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/200910220357/MNH0101/910220715>).

State of Washington wants pennies for its kids, too

School-funding reformers in Wisconsin, pay attention: There will be an initiative on the ballot in November for voters in Washington -- Initiative 884 -- to add one-cent to the sales tax to raise about \$1 billion a year for public schools, higher education, and early childhood learning (http://www.seattlepi.com/opinion/194382_i884ed.html).

According to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, inadequate state support has left the state with substantial needs that threaten to damage the future of young people, the economy, and the state's ability to compete. In an editorial, the paper said, "We fear that I-884 could be the last chance for years to give education a badly needed boost." There was also an interesting comment about "people who demand school reform before making any investments (ignoring) the improvements and results we already receive from education."

Apparently folks in Washington have the same concerns as we have in Wisconsin, but the *Post-Intelligencer* still gave the go-ahead. "A study by the business-backed Washington Research Council found that the sales tax would make only a limited dent in expected job growth. Our state's exemption of food makes the sales tax more fair." In other words, Wisconsin, it can be done.

Business leaders back expansion of early childhood education

The economic downturn put many worthy goals and projects on hold, but it hasn't dampened the enthusiasm of business leaders around the state and country for increasing America's investment in early childhood development (<http://www.jsonline.com/business/59945157.html>).

Three executives from Appleton-area companies were recently among 110 public, private, and philanthropic leaders meeting in Telluride, CO, for briefings on how businesses can help build coalitions for expanding pre-school learning. At issue is an effort to make early childhood development a greater policy priority, following research that suggests that there are broad benefits from better preparing children for school, especially disadvantaged children.

Business leaders look at early childhood education as an investment, not a cost. David Vander Zanden, chief executive officer of School Specialty Inc., Greenville, WI, said: "If you sit down with business people and explain to them how this works ... what happens to help make that person successful, those are the people that 18 years later they're hiring into their work force. They're the ones helping society be better. We eliminate a lot of problems in adulthood if our children are better educated at an earlier age."

WAES needs renewals, new members to continue work

WAES is doing good work. It is part of an ever-growing statewide effort to change the way we fund public schools, and it is the leader of "Pennies for Kids"

(<http://www.excellentschools.org/events/PenniesForKids.htm>)," an effort to stop the fiscal and educational crisis created by the last state budget. Without your help, however, this work won't get done.

Not only does WAES need you as an individual or your organization to join the coalition (<http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>), but we need your financial support. WAES is a non-profit organization that is funded by its members. Your dues are tax deductible. School districts or teachers groups should contact Tom Beebe (920-650-0525 or beebe@excellentschools.org) for more information and for the dues structure. Other groups and individuals can go to <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm> to join, including paying your dues via PayPal.

Since the last update, the following have renewed their memberships: the Milwaukee Area Retired Teachers Association, the Madison Area Retired Teachers Association, and the school districts of Florence (<http://www.florence.k12.wi.us/>) and Minocqua J1 (<http://www.mhlt.org/>).

Other states get it ... what's wrong with Wisconsin?

What do other states get that we don't? First Washington is looking at its own pennies for kids (see above) and now candidates for governor of Minnesota are calling for tax hikes to fund education.

At a recent AFL-CIO sponsored forum, several of the 11 announced or potential Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party candidates for governor in 2010 called for more tax dollars for school (<http://www.allbusiness.com/government/government-bodies-offices-regional-local/13107298-1.html>). While admitting it was politically risky, they said the economic crisis has "slashed state revenue collections ... and more money is needed for the state's K-12 and higher education systems."

They get it in Massachusetts, too, where 43 Democratic legislators signed onto a proposal to fund a \$600,000 adequacy study of the state's education system (<http://www.wickedlocal.com/gloucester/news/education/x786214932/Lawmakers-seek-review-of-18-year-old-education-funding-formula>). While admitting the economy might postpone needed increases in school funding, the lawmakers "pointed to legal opinions requiring high-quality education for all and raised the specter of potential lawsuits if the state doesn't begin preparing now."

Colorado Supreme Court will hear adequacy challenge

Oct. 19, the Colorado Supreme Court denied a motion to dismiss a case in which the plaintiffs challenge the adequacy of the state's school-funding system.

According to *Education Justice*, a project of the Education Law Center (<http://www.elc-pa.org/>), the supreme court concluded that the courts have the responsibility to determine whether the financing system complies with the education clause in the state constitution. This ruling means that the case will proceed to trial.

The full text of *Lobato v. State* can be found at http://www.educationjustice.org/newsletters/nlej_iss12_Headline_Lobato.pdf.

WAES members take case on funding reform to the public

As they so often do, WAES members are speaking out about problems with school funding in Wisconsin. Recently, Jill Ellinwood of Baraboo and John Smart of Park Falls were in the news.

In a letter to the editor of the *Baraboo News Republic*, Ellinwood talks about the cuts to programs and services, including "course eliminations, higher class size, loss of teaching assistants, loss of funding for libraries, school closures, bare bones bus routes, and the list goes on (http://www.wiscnews.com/bnr/archives/index.php?archAction=arch_read&a_from=browse&a_file=/bnr/2009/10/12/465731.php)."

She urges the community to get involved in a statewide solution to the problem, and says "it's time for this community to 'get real' about how school funding works and what the real costs of adequate funding are. Roll up your sleeves, educate yourself on school funding, find what has been done, and what could be done."

Smart, who is a former school board member and on the WAES board of directors, has put out the call for "Pennies for Kids." Pointing out the state's problems with meeting its commitment to school funding in the *Ashland Daily Press* (<http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2009/10/19/opinions/doc4adc7a081e14e375777911.txt>), Smart said no politician ever wants to raise taxes because "people might get mad, after all, and not vote for them." He rightly points out, however, that "revenues are needed and, in a democracy, that's where revenue comes from for public education."

It's time for America to pay attention to its schools again

In an column in the Oct. 9, *New York Times*, Paul Krugman called on Americans to once again pay attention to its schools, because if "you had to explain America's economic success with one word, that word would be education (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/09/opinion/09krugman.html>)."

"Until now," Krugman says, the results of education neglect have been gradual -- a slow-motion erosion of America's relative position (in the world). But things are about to get much worse, as the economic crisis -- its effects exacerbated by the penny-wise, pound-foolish behavior that passes for fiscal responsibility in Washington -- deals a severe blow to education across the board."

Krugman calls on Congress to approve another big round of aid to state governments for their schools -- what he calls "an investment in our future" -- and, in the long-run, a reversal of the neglect of our public schools.

Help WAES correct e-mail update glitch

Some of you receiving this e-mail update are frustrated by the way it arrives -- endlessly long lines that are patience-trying to read. Hopefully we can help each other out.

As of now, only a handful of subscribers are suffering with this glitch. If you receive these endless lines, let me know and I will send you a text version that seems to take care of the problem.

Also, if you know how to fix it, let me know at tbeebe@excellentschools.org. Thanks.

Help us better serve you by letting us know when you change your e-mail address. In that way we can stop sending the update to the old one and switch over to the new address as soon as possible.

School-funding reform calendar

- Nov. 5 -- School-funding reform presentation with the Madison Elementary School PTA (Wauwatosa School District ... <http://www.wauwatosa.k12.wi.us/schools/elementary/madison/>), 6:30 p.m. at the Madison Elementary School Library, 9225 West Glendale Avenue
- Nov. 12 -- School-funding reform presentation, sponsored by the Door County Democratic Party, 7 p.m. Panel will include representatives of area school districts. More information as it becomes available.
- Nov. 16 -- Discussion about what students can do to win school-funding reform with Region V (<http://www.wasc.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=13>) of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (<http://www.wasc.org>), 8 a.m. at the Marriott West (<http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/msnwe-madison-marriott-west/>), Middleton
- Nov. 18 -- School-funding reform discussion with the members of the Issues Committee of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (WREA at <http://www.wrea.net>), Baraboo, more details when they are available
- Nov. 19 -- Discussion about what students can do to win school-funding reform with Region IV (<http://www.wasc.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=12>) of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (<http://www.wasc.org>), 8:30 a.m., in Brookfield
- Nov. 20 -- Discussion about what students can do to win school-funding reform with Region II (<http://www.wasc.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=9>) of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (<http://www.wasc.org>), 8:30 a.m. at the Plaza Hotel (<http://www.plazawausau.com/>) in Wausau
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