

# School-funding update, Week of Jan. 3, 2011

- **Tell your school's story at new WAES website**
- **Increase in poverty puts stress on educational opportunities**
- **Effective educational opportunities depend on adequate resources**
- **Wisconsin's school districts preparing for the worst**
- **Funding reform on state newspapers' wish lists for 2011**
- **Legislators tell school board to get "creative" with budget**
- **WAES welcomes Greenfield Parents Education Association**
- **Diane Ravitch part of education challenge series, March 8**
- **Legislature has put school boards in unenviable position**
- **School-funding reform calendar**

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](mailto:tbeebe@excellentschools.org)

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## **Tell your school's story at new WAES website**

No one expected school-funding reform to be a slam dunk during the next legislative session, but we are beginning to see just how far we have to go. Rep. Keith Ripp, of Lodi, recently told the Sauk Prairie School Board to expect to make more cuts to programs and services and that Governor-elect Scott Walker has signaled that there is little chance State Superintendent Tony Evers' reform plan will be considered (see more about Ripp's comments below).

Rep. Ripp said this despite 18 years of cuts to programs and services that have already diminished the quality and quantity of our children's education. Even though Wisconsin's school-funding formula doesn't work, some members of State Government still haven't grasped the truth that the state is paying an increasingly smaller share of school costs, which is in turn driving up local property taxes, and our children and communities keep losing precious opportunities.

If they still don't get it, our job is to keep telling the truth. To make that easy and effective, WAES has opened a new website at <http://tellyourschoolstory.org/>. Go to the site and it will take you only a few minutes to let the rest of Wisconsin know what is happening in your school district -- and to add your story to voices from around the state. We know what will happen to our kids and their schools if state officials don't act, and this is your opportunity to tell your legislators what those consequences will be for their constituents.

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## **Increase in poverty puts stress on educational opportunities**

Wisconsin's constitution guarantees every child in the state -- no matter what their circumstances or zip code -- the opportunity for a quality education. Depending on specific situations, some children need more resources to achieve those opportunities, but, in the long run, the investment is well worth it for society and the economy.

One of those circumstances is poverty. Wisconsin has long understood the need to offset poverty if children are to receive the education they need to put them on the right track for a successful future. SAGE ... Student Achievement Guarantee in Education ... was established in 1996 to increase student achievement through changes in academic strategies, such as decreasing class sizes.

The economic downturn and our school-funding formula, however, are putting a stress on that investment. At the same time school districts are being forced to cut programs and services and increase class sizes, "the majority of Wisconsin counties saw their poverty rates increase by more than 10 percent since 2000 (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/112160384.html>)." According to a study by the University of Wisconsin Extension, "These numbers suggest that economic development, including living wages, health benefits, food security, and housing affordability (and we would add educational opportunities) should be front and center in policy discussions."

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## **Effective educational opportunities depend on adequate resources**

Those who oppose increasing the state's investment in opportunities for our children -- and thereby increasing the quality of Wisconsin's workforce in the long run -- love to repeat the time worn excuse that "you can't just throw money at the problem." Instead, they talk about educational reforms and doing things differently.

According to a story in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/112481794.html>), for instance, one "something different" is putting into practice research that shows the "most important school factor in student performance is the effectiveness of classroom teachers." One way this might play out, the story says about the change in leadership in Madison from Democrats to Republicans, is "support for a teacher evaluation system and implementing models of pay based on incentives that would reward effective teachers." In addition to better compensation for deserving teachers, this approach requires better data collection and analysis, determining why the best teachers are effective, and then finding a way to pass along this new knowledge.

And, according to Governor-elect Scott Walker, school boards throughout Wisconsin will "have to figure out how to do this without an influx of new funding."

So, it really isn't about "throwing more money at the problem," it's about investing adequate resources in research-tested technology and practices that provide children with the opportunities they need to succeed. If we want education reform, we need to make that investment.

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## **Wisconsin's school districts preparing for the worst**

Before the old year ended and the new year began ... and based on 18 years of experience ... educators, parents, students, and taxpayers around Wisconsin were taking an unsettling look into the 2011 crystal ball. Fears continue to mount about fewer educational opportunities, more budget shortfalls, and increasing property taxes.

It is an understatement to say, as the *Janesville Gazette* did recently (<http://www.gazettextra.com/news/2010/dec/26/janesville-teachers-disquieted-over-layoff-predict/>), that teachers are disquieted over lay-off predictions. The district is facing a potential budget shortfall of almost \$10 million and the possibilities are putting folks on edge. Some teachers contacted by the Gazette "were reluctant to rock the boat at a time when their futures are on the line." Already an assistant principal has been eliminated, class sizes increased, and the talk is about cutting 50 to 70 of the districts 800-plus teaching positions.

The unease is similar in Merrill where the district is preparing to send out lay-off notices to 35 teachers (<http://www.wausaudailyherald.com/article/20101221/WDH0101/12210453/Merrill-schools-finances-bleak>). The lay-off proposal was part of a four-tier approach to next year's budget that is \$1.3 million in the red. If state funding dwindles, however, the district might need to cut over \$3 million. Also on the table are cutting elective programs, limiting the arts, and close rural schools.

Folks in Green Bay are looking at the changes in the statewide political landscape and wondering if it will affect

local school funding (<http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/article/20101226/GPG0101/12260548/Educators-worry-school-funding-could-shrink>). School board member Mike Blecha noted that the state revenue limit is down from \$275 per student to \$200 ... and it could be reduced even further, perhaps to \$100 per student. "We could survive, but would be a real financial burden," Blecha said. "We'd have to look at cutting programs and other pretty big reductions."

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## **Funding reform on state newspapers' wish lists for 2011**

It's that time of the year again ... time for newspapers around the state to write editorials about New Year's resolutions, wishes for 2011, and the "new" state agenda. School-funding reformers should feel good, in one sense, because our issue remains on the top of everyone's list. The problem is that reform has been on most of these lists for over a decade with few if any results. In other words, the satisfaction we feel in being right is offset by our elected officials inability to fix the problem.

Most recently, the *Appleton Post-Crescent* has joined the parade of newspapers putting school-funding reform on its list of priorities for 2011 (<http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20110102/APC0602/101020342/P-C-s-editorial-agenda-for-2011>). For years we've talked about changing the way our schools are funded, the *Post-Crescent* said. "Right now, with districts relying on property taxes and state funding, they scramble to assemble their budgets. It's time lawmakers came up with a solution that's fair to all districts."

Nothing to disagree with there, right? If only these newspapers would actually suggest some solutions rather than just bemoan the status quo. WAES recommends to them what it recommends to you. First, get involved with WAES. Go to our website at <http://www.excellentschools.org> and see what you can do. Second, support a one-cent increase in the sales tax (sign the petition at <http://www.apennyforkids.org>) to address the revenue crisis in our schools created by 17 years under the present system. And, third, go to <http://www.tellyourschoolstory.org> and take three minutes to tell the rest of the state what's going on in your community ... a story the Post-Crescent and other newspaper can use as fodder for the next editorial about real changes in the school-funding system.

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## **Legislators tell school board to get "creative" with budget**

If school-funding reformers are looking for a road map to follow into the next legislative session, a couple of Assemblymen offered you a hint at a recent appearance before the Sauk Prairie School Board ([http://www.wiscnews.com/saukprairieeagle/news/local/article\\_c1c3ee66-0ddb-11e0-a2c3-001cc4c03286.html](http://www.wiscnews.com/saukprairieeagle/news/local/article_c1c3ee66-0ddb-11e0-a2c3-001cc4c03286.html)).

The story in the *Sauk Prairie Eagle* is headlined "State reps say school cuts possible." That just about says it all ... although neither Representative could explain how more cuts on the back of 18 years of teacher lay-offs, class size increases, and decreasing opportunities makes any sense. Newly-elected Representative Howard Marklein (<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=51>), of Spring Green, for instance, "said it's time for schools to get 'creative,'" a comment that can't sit well with communities that have been doing just that for well over a decade. For his part, Rep. Keith Ripp (<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=47>), of Lodi, also talked about cuts to programs and services, commenting that "just throwing more money at (schools) isn't going to solve" any problems.

Sauk Prairie School District (<http://www.saukpr.k12.wi.us/>) Superintendent Craig Bender took these dire warnings to heart. He predicted the next Legislature would cut state aid and reduce the district's revenue cap, effectively reducing any revenue increase for educating the children of Sauk Prairie. Last year, the district cut \$780,000 and is "exploring such drastic cuts as potentially closing one of its three outlying elementary schools."

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## **WAES welcomes Greenfield Parents Education Association**

The newest member of the coalition is the Greenfield Parents Education Association. Renewing memberships since the last newsletter are the school districts of Madison (<http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/>) and Milwaukee (<http://www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/>), the Northern Tier Uniserv (<http://www.ntu1.com/>), and WEAC-Fox Valley (<http://www.weac.org/weacfoxvalley/>).

"A Penny for Kids" (<http://www.apennyforkids.org>), a chance to tell about the effects of school-funding cuts on your kids and communities (<http://tellyourschoolstory.org/>), the Wisconsin Adequacy Plan (<http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/CostOutSummary.pdf>), and educational opportunities throughout the state about a school-funding system that works for kids, schools, and communities ([http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/Host\\_presentation.htm](http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/Host_presentation.htm)) are only part of what you get with a membership in the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES at <http://www.excellentschools.org>).

To keep it all going, though, we need your help. If you or your organization want to join WAES -- or renew your membership -- contact WAES (see below) or go to <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm>.

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## **Diane Ravitch part of education challenge series, March 8**

Education scholar Diane Ravitch will be in Madison in March to take part in the first of a three-part Wisconsin Academy series called "education is Fundamental." The series aims to bring together leading historians, researchers, and administrators to discuss the most important education challenges facing Wisconsin.

Ravitch (<http://www.dianeravitch.com/>) will appear from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 8, in the Union Theater at the UW Memorial Union, 800 Langdon Street, Madison. The one-time supporter of "No Child Left Behind" has done an about face and has stirred up plenty of controversy with her change of heart. Ravitch will present "an informed analysis of the current state of American education -- what's broken and what are the best ways to fix it."

On March 22, the second program in the series will be held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison, featuring a panel including Madison Superintendent Dan Nerad, Milwaukee Superintendent Gregory Thornton, Marquette education professor Howard Fuller, and Michael Thompson, deputy state superintendent with the Department of Public Instruction. The final event, March 29 at the museum, will feature Professor Adam Gamoran, director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, talking about the effect of reform efforts on the achievement gaps between white children and students of color.

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## **Legislature has put local school boards in unenviable position**

It's called taxing to the maximum, and fewer Wisconsin school districts will be doing it in the future, leading to a further decline in revenue being invested in public education (<http://www.thenorthwestern.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=201012190342>).

For years, school districts and funding reformers have complained about revenue caps for not keeping pace with rising school costs. Yet last year, about 25 percent of districts didn't even tax up to the amount allowed under the revenue cap law. Many opponents of school-funding reform in the Legislature use this fact to dismiss pleas for reform and a larger state investment, saying districts need to help themselves before turning to the state.

Actually, it is the Legislature and the state that put local school districts -- and more importantly children -- in this dire situation. As the state has reduced its share of revenue to cover school costs, more and more of the burden has fallen on local property taxpayers. School boards find themselves in the unenviable position of cutting programs and services and raising property taxes just to maintain a declining status quo. Many boards

have reached their limit and just can't ask already squeezed taxpayers for more money, and, as a result, young people continue to lose quality educational opportunities.

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## **School-funding reform calendar**

- Jan. 6 -- Discussion of school-funding reform with the District Advisory Council of Milwaukee Public Schools ([http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt/comm/mps\\_home/335](http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt/comm/mps_home/335)), 7 p.m., at the central office at 5225 West Vliet Street
- Feb. 9 -- School-funding reform discussion Oneida and Vilas County Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net>), more details as they become available
- Sept. 15 -- School-funding reform discussion with the members of the Beloit Area Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net/>), 8:30 a.m. at the River of Life Church (<http://www.theriveroflifeumc.org/>), 511 Public Avenue, Beloit

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Please feel free to share your copy of the WAES school-funding update with anyone interested in this important public policy issue. Contact Tom Beebe at [tbeebe@excellentschools.org](mailto:tbeebe@excellentschools.org) or 920-650-0525 for details.