

School-funding update for the week of Jan. 4, 2010

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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.

Sign petition urging legislators to consider "A Penny for Kids"

As many of the stories that follow show, Wisconsin's school-funding crisis continues to deepen. WAES will continue to work for comprehensive, long-term reform, but we also realize that the crisis was made even worse when the State decided to actually cut aid to public schools in the last two-year budget. You can do something right now to begin turning things around.

Go to "[A Penny for Kids](http://www.apennyforkids.org)" (<http://www.apennyforkids.org>) and sign the petition urging the Legislature to raise Wisconsin's sales tax one penny -- from 5¢ to 6¢ -- to not only put desperately needed revenue into our public school classrooms but to also hold down the property tax increases built into the last state budget. A one penny increase in the sales tax isn't an answer to the problem, but it will buy us the time to find the solution.

Once you've signed the petition there is much more for you to do. The "[A Penny for Kids](http://www.apennyforkids.org)" website will keep you up-to-date on what is happening to school districts around the state; help you stay involved through Twitter, Facebook, and message forwarding to your e-mail contacts; and give you some material for contacting the media and legislators, including talking points, printed material, and help finding out who represents you in Madison.

Governor's school-funding reform ... raise property taxes?

As the year ends, Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle continues to talk about school-funding reform, but many groups, including WAES, remain skeptical. The key components are a chance to win \$250 million in federal Race to the Top money and granting revenue cap flexibility to districts that meet certain reform and cost-saving measures.

In an interview with the *Wisconsin State Journal* (http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt_and_politics/article_27c3f162-f027-11de-bc1b-001cc4c002e0.html), Doyle -- who said more details will be available later -- said winning the Race to the Top money depends on "programs to improve student learning." It is, however, one-time money and the Governor wants to lift revenue caps to keep programs in place. The problem is that revenue cap flexibility means only that school districts will be allowed to raise property taxes even more. Also, the \$250 million in additional federal stimulus money is approximately the amount of aid the state cut for schools in the last state budget.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/79737707.html>) pointed out that doing away with revenue limits -- after having already backed away from the state's commitment to pay two-thirds of the cost of education -- would pull the final leg out from under the three-legged school-funding system the state adopted in 1992. Limits on teacher pay (the QEO) were eliminated in the last state budget.

UW education dean wonders if a "Race to the Top" is what is needed

Although Governor Jim Doyle thinks the federal Race to the Top stimulus might be the answer to Wisconsin's school-funding crisis, not everyone agrees with him. Pointing out that "true education reform is not a race," Julie Underwood, dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://www.education.wisc.edu/>), doesn't see it as a chance to plug financial holes.

Instead, Underwood, who is also the facilitator of the School Finance Network (<http://www.sfnwisconsin.org>), says "just as Race to the Top is not a silver bullet for financial support, neither is it educational reform. True educational reform is comprehensive and has a long-term impact on the quality of education, requiring sustained effort and years of work."

Former Madison Mayor Paul Soglin agreed with Underwood on his blog (<http://www.waxingamerica.com/2009/12/wisconsin-education-do-we-even-need-a-race.html>) saying that "the real struggle in Wisconsin has been in maintaining the quality public school system created by previous generations. Our public schools," he said, "operate under a financial system that chokes reform and chips away at quality."

Neenah, Stevens Point deal with school budget deficits

Throughout the last 15 years, our public schools have done a good job fighting off the effects of a funding system that no longer works for many kids, schools, and communities. While the quality of education has held up, the quantity of that education -- one of Wisconsin's proudest traditions -- has slipped. Read on and judge for yourself.

The Neenah School Board, faced with a \$2.8 million budget deficit next year, voted earlier this month to phase out German over the next five years (<http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20091216/APC0101/912160491/1979/Neenah-schools-will-eliminate-teaching-of-German>). Speaking of the cuts needed to fill in the revenue hole, one board member commented, "We have to start somewhere." German is not the only course facing the way of the dodo. Administrators also have recommended the elimination of the seventh-grade world language introductory class that teaches French, German, and Spanish (despite research that says the earlier children learn a foreign language, the better).

Stevens Point School Board members, meeting just before Christmas, delivered another \$2.2 million in cuts from its 2010-11 budget, bringing the total to \$3.5 million. They need to chop another \$3.8 following rejection of a \$23.1 million three-year referendum in November (<http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/article/20091222/SPJ0101/912220604/1983/Schools-cut-2.2M-for-10-11>). The latest round of cuts included 25.7 full-time equivalent teaching positions. Board treasurer Lynda Louis said it was "the saddest day in the history of this district."

School-funding formula is moving the pain around the state

WAES has long talked about the continuum of the school-funding crisis. Some districts understood the breadth and depth of the problems long before others ... for example small and rural school districts throughout the northern part of the state. Now, however, it is safe to say that real pain is being felt in all corners of Wisconsin.

For example, few -- outside of WAES members -- thought we would be reading headlines talking about the "need for painful financial cuts" in the Madison area. Yet, a story in a recent issue of the *Wisconsin State Journal* detailed problems in Stoughton, Monona Grove, Verona, and Brodhead (http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/article_88d2050a-ef61-11de-b758-001cc4c002e0.html).

When Stoughton's Yahara Elementary School was closed last June, the district expected the \$1 million cost savings to help balance the books into the next decade. But despite that move, plus 68 staff lay-offs and reduced bus routes in recent years, the district now faces another gap -- of \$3 million over the next three years -- and the school board is considering taking a referendum to voters in April.

New school but old funding problems for Greenfield

Alan Borsuk, veteran education writer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, described the conundrum facing School District of Greenfield Superintendent Conrad Farner as "like a guy with a beautiful home and an ugly checkbook." That's pretty accurate, because Farner and the community have a beautifully refurbished high school but a school budget that "is not even close to what our students need (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/79737707.html>)."

Greenfield -- the newest member of WAES -- resurrected a high school that was basically sinking into the ground. As districts throughout the state are finding out, however, buildings aren't the problem ... the funding system is. Farner argues that unless something changes quickly in the way Wisconsin funds schools, "Greenfield -- along with numerous districts across the state -- will reach a point where it will simply not be able to pay its bills or will have to go back to voters seeking operating money (in the form of property tax increases) beyond the state-set limits."

You can read more about what Farner and the Greenfield community are doing on the WAES website at <http://www.excellentschools.org>.

Greenfield joins WAES, but your help is needed

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 "A Penny for Kids (<http://www.apennyforkids.org>)," a campaign 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 tbeebe@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 School District of Greenfield (<http://www.greenfield.k12.wi.us/>) and Lukas Diaz of Madison have joined WAES, and the White Lake School District (<http://www.whitelake.k12.wi.us/>) renewed its membership.

School-funding, education reform forum set in Middleton, Jan. 28

Although the line-up hasn't been set yet, the Dane County Grass Roots Network will be sponsoring a forum on the reform of education and school funding, Jan. 28 in Middleton, centered on a discussion based on the availability of federal Race to the Top money.

On the invitation list are Jessica Doyle, wife of Governor Jim Doyle and an educator; Sen. Russ Decker, Senate majority leader; Sen. John Lehman, chair of the Senate Education Committee; Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts, chair of the Assembly Education Committee; Sen. Jon Erpenbach, a member of the Senate Education Committee; Rob Meyer, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison value added research center; John Forester, government relations director of the School Administrators Alliance; and Tom Beebe, executive director of WAES.

The event will be held from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in the Middleton Fire House Lecture Room (<http://www.mifd.net/>), 7600 University Avenue.

Rep. Mark Pocan talks funding reform in the Lions' Den

Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Madison at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=78>) came to the Madison Metropolitan School District Board of Education earlier this month to explain why the state budget had such a large, negative impact on the district, contributing to a \$12 million cut in state aid (<http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/node/5273>). Pocan, who is also a co-chair of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance, probably got more than he expected.

Rep. Pocan said there are serious problems with the funding formula and that "part of the problem was the Governor wanted to cut much deeper than the Legislature. We had our hands tied," he said. Board members, however, weren't about to let go easily. There's more focus on what's happening with property taxes, than what's happening to our students," member Lucy Mathiak said. And member Johnny Winston, Jr., said, "I'll be honest, I'm a bit disappointed in what I'm hearing. Any type of stimulus or economic development has to start with education. We need to fix (the formula) and start moving in a better direction."

Madison community blogger and WAES member TJ Mertz, commented on the visit by Rep. Pocan in a piece entitled, "Mark Pocan in the Lion's Den (<http://madisonamps.org/2009/12/05/mark-pocan-in-the-lions-den-last-mondays-mmsd-board-meeting/>)." "The short version of what transpired," Mertz said, "is that although Pocan brought Bob Lang and Dave Loppnow from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lfb/>) as support, they were unable to shut the lions' mouths and the Board got a few nips in."

Gazette surprised Wisconsin spends less than average on schools

Pop quiz courtesy of *The Janesville Gazette*: Does Wisconsin spend more, less or about the same as the national per-capita average of K-12 education (<http://thewheelerreport.com/releases/dec09/dec7/1207janesvilletaxhell.pdf>)? The answer is "less" according to a new report that shows Wisconsin spent below the U.S. average in 2007 ... for the first time in the last two decades.

The *Gazette* editorial writer expressed surprise because "Wisconsinites value education and have long been willing to invest in their children's futures." As a matter of fact, the *Gazette* said quoting the Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>) the Badger State has the nation's highest high school graduation rate, our students score among the top states on college entrance exams, and more and more high school students are taking rigorous college-level courses.

As a parting shot, the editorial also said, "so much for state and national business groups and publications that brand us as a tax hell and suggest the Badger State is a bad place for commerce. Those (groups) based in Wisconsin might want to consider whether they're helping paint an inaccurate image that only perpetuates the problem."

IWF, WTA note drops in Wisconsin's spending and taxing ranks

The Institute for Wisconsin's Future (IWF at <http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org>) picked up on *The Janesville Gazette's* theme in its most recent newsletter pointing to a news release from the Wisconsin Taxpayers' Alliance saying that the state's spending and taxes are both down (http://www.wistax.org/news_releases/2009/2009_17.html).

According to the report, Wisconsin's 50-state spending rank dropped to 26th. Corrections had a higher national rank in 2007 than in 1993 and fire protection dropped the most. On the revenue side, IWF said "there is a notable lack of balance." Wisconsin is 25th for corporations who provide one-half percent of state revenue but 10th for property taxes and 12 for income taxes.

To read the IWF newsletter, "Fair and Adequate," go to http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org/pubs_pages/fair_adequate.html. You can sign up to receive the newsletter at http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org/mailling_list.html.

New report says better early education would benefit the economy

A three-year study by the Public Policy Forum has reiterated what many have claimed for years: There is an economic benefit to quality early childhood education programs.

The new report relies on research showing a correlation between high-quality early learning experiences and higher rates of achievement in school, especially for disadvantaged children (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/79871897.html>). Anneliese Dickman, the Forum's research director, said, "We really saw early childhood education as the forefront of education reform."

Wisconsin is left with a challenge, however: The report suggests more than doubling the expense of care for infants and young children up to age five. In the current system, child care providers are estimated to spend about \$5,625 per child annually. The Public Policy Forum report found that "a system of high-quality early childhood education programs would cost about \$11,500 per child, per year."

Correction to an earlier story

The Nov. 30 issue of the "School-funding update" contained an incorrect number. The story was "Latest state budget continues to complicate school-funding impact." It stated that gross school district property taxes are increasing 7.16 percent. The actual increase is 6.04 percent.

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

- Jan. 18, 2010 --Two school-funding reform discussions in Nekoosa: 4-5 p.m. for the staff of the Nekoosa School District (<http://www.nekoosaschools.org/>) and 6:30-8 p.m. for the community; at Nekoosa High School, 500 Cedar Street
- Jan. 28 -- School-funding forum sponsored by the Dane County Grass Roots Network; 7-8:30 p.m. in the Middleton Fire House (<http://www.mifd.net/>) Lecture Room, 7600 University Avenue, Middleton (see story above)
- Feb. 3 -- School-funding reform discussion at the German Immersion School (http://www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/german_imm/), 3778 North 82nd Street, Milwaukee, 6:30 p.m., sponsored by the German Immersion School PTA
- March 1 -- LaCrosse Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net/>) sponsors a discussion on school-funding reform (details when they become available)
- March 9 -- School-funding reform discussion with students in the Education Leadership and Policy Analysis class (<http://www.education.wisc.edu/elpa/>) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, 7:15 p.m., Room 212, Education Science Building, 1025 West Johnson Street, Madison
- April 26 -- School-funding reform discussion with the Racine Rotary Club West at noon; more details as they become available
- May 10 -- School-funding reform discussion with the Stevens Point Area Retired Teachers Association (<http://www.wrea.net/>), 12:30 p.m., at the Sky Club (<http://skyclubdining.com/>) in Plover

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 or 920-650-0525 for details.

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