

School-funding update for week of Feb. 2, 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.

SFN funding-reform plan unveiled around the state

WAES is a partner in the School Finance Network (SFN), and voted, in November, to go forward into the 2009-11 legislative session with the coalition's reform plan and an agenda to work with the state's elected leaders.

The first step will be taken today and tomorrow when SFN unveils its reform plan for the public at 10 media events around the state on Tuesday, Feb. 3, in Green Bay, West Allis, Verona, Wausau, and Altoona, and Wednesday, Feb. 4, in LaCrosse, Superior, Rhinelander, Racine, and Janesville. For more details about the events, the SFN plan, and what you can do to help go to <http://www.sfnwisconsin.org>.

SFN partners include the Fair Aid Coalition, Wisconsin Education Association Council, Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, AFT-Wisconsin, Wisconsin PTA, Schools Administrators Alliance, and Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators. Also taking part are the school districts of Milwaukee and Madison.

To read more about this next step in school-funding reform, go to the WAES website at <http://www.excellentschools.org>.

Stories detail school-funding crisis in northern Wisconsin

In a two-part series in the *Rhineland Daily News*, staff writer Giles Morris details the problems facing school districts throughout northern Wisconsin because of the school-funding system. According to Morris, voters have said no to more property tax increases and wonders if that means communities "will be forced to slowly dismantle their education systems" or "will the state finally work out a way to ease the strain on its school districts."

The first story

(<http://www.rhinelanddailynews.com/articles/2009/01/17/news/doc497168a7b0012113068868.txt>) deals with the politics of school-funding reform. Comments from Assembly Majority Leader Tom Nelson (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=5>), 34th District

Rep. Don Meyer (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=34>), and 12th District Sen. Jim Holperin (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Senate&district=12>) don't offer much hope to those in need. On the other hand, Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=79>) challenges her cohorts. After citing the area's crisis in education, she says, "Who are we going to hide behind now? I think the duck and cover is the economy but our economy isn't going to get better without an educated workforce."

Reform options are the subject of the second article (<http://www.rhinelanderdailynews.com/articles/2009/01/19/news/doc49748945cee82406872662.txt>), especially the one offered by the School Finance Network (SFN at <http://www.sfnwisconsin.org>). WAES is a partner in WAES. According to Dr. Andrew Reschovsky, a professor in applied economics and public affairs at the LaFollette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, "It is fair to say that while Rhinelander's situation may be unique, it's not all that atypical." The story goes on to talk about the need for a formula that addresses the needs of all children in all districts around the state.

Federal stimulus plan targets education in all 50 states

In yet another acknowledgment of the insufficiency of school-funding formulas in states around the country, including Wisconsin, it is apparent that the stimulus package being discussed in Washington, D.C., could devote as much as \$150 billion to new federal spending on the nation's schools, child care centers, and universities that would more than double the Department of Education's current budget (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/education/28educ.html>).

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has released a fact sheet (<http://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/legislation?id=0273#education>) detailing possibilities for use of the funds. According to the Speaker's office, "economists tell us that strategic investments in education are one of the best ways to help America become stronger and more productive and competitive." The stimulus plan, she says, "will make bold investments to provide children with a 21st century education."

The Congressional Research Service has issued a report, "Proposed Funding for Education in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009" (http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R40151_20090122.pdf), gives some idea about how much is going to each state and to what programs and services. To see how the stimulus affects your school district, go to <http://edlabor.house.gov/documents/111/pdf/publications/WISCONSIN2009Stimulus.pdf>.

IWF continues work on reforming Wisconsin tax policy

While everyone else is talking about cutting critical and necessary programs -- including our schools -- the Institute for Wisconsin's Future (IWF at <http://www.wisconsinfuture.org>) continues to find new and innovative ways to make sure we protect the public services that make the Badger State the type of place people want to move to and live in.

In a recent report, IWF research director Jack Norman talks about raising state tax revenue without raising taxes. The report is called "Investing in Revenue: How Wisconsin can profit by using the Minnesota Model for closing the tax gap" (<http://www.wisconsinfuture.org/publications/taxes/InvestingInRevenue.pdf>). Norman makes the point that a reinvestment in the Department of Revenue -- to help with tax auditing and collections -- can be a reasonable part of a multi-faceted approach to closing the state's budget shortfall and maintaining crucial programs and services. A \$25 million investment in tax-enforcement resources for the DOR could return \$200 million in additional revenue in the coming state budget 2009-11 biennium, the report argues.

Additionally, IWF is spearheading a community-organizing effort around the state to explore methods for modernizing Wisconsin's tax policy and other options for long-term state fiscal reform. The most recent event, Jan. 27, was held with over 40 leaders from Eau Claire and Altoona. You can see the forum at <http://www.wqow.com/global/video/flash/popupplayer.asp?ClipID1=3383679&h1=Budget%20Meeting&vt1=v&at1=News&d1=45233&LaunchPageAdTag=News&activePane=info&rnd=85006119>.

List of new, renewed WAES members is growing

WAES brings something unique to the school-funding reform effort: A strategy to build grassroots coalitions around Wisconsin -- of students, parents, school board members, educators, community members, and taxpayers -- that will come together to work with legislators for change. We can't do that, however, without your help.

Recently joining WAES are Barbara Blackmore; the Neshkoro Elementary School PTO (Westfield); Richland Area Retired Educators Association; and the school districts of Evansville, Washburn, Cumberland, and Randall. Renewing their memberships were Sally Overholt, Janet Kane, Winnie Doxsie, Vickie Strattner, John Simonson, Paul Kusuda, John LaCourt, and Connie Molbeck. Organizations renewing were Disability Rights Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted, Rock Valley United Teachers-Retired, Wisconsin PTA, the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, Project ABC-Waukesha, and the Fond du Lac Retired Educators Association. Renewing teachers unions include WEAC-Fox Valley Uniserv, the West Central Education Association, Green Bay Education Association, Cedar Lake United Educators, and the Kenosha Education Association. Ongoing school district members of WAES are Hurley, Platteville, Reedsville, Westfield, Cadott, Laona, Sturgeon Bay, and Southwestern.

If you haven't joined the effort to bring the reform message to everyone, do it now. WAES is an independent, non-profit, dues-supported organization (<http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>). If we are going to organize communities around the state for change, we need your talent, your time, and your financial support. Go to <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm> ... it's quick, it's easy, and you can join online.

Fewer dropouts would save U.S. billions of dollars

If anyone still wonders about the value of investing in education, a new report will drive the report home. It claims that boosting the high school graduation rate would save the United States \$127,000 per new graduate - - about \$45 billion annually if the number of dropouts were cut in half.

The report (http://www.cbcse.org/media/download_gallery/Leeds_Report_Final_Jan2007.pdf) was issued by the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University (<http://www.cbcse.org/>). The savings would be achieved via extra tax revenues, reduced costs of public health, crime and justice, and decreased welfare payments. Even a one-fifth reduction in dropouts would result in an annual \$18 billion savings, and these figures do not even include the benefit to the graduate, just to society.

"Educational investments to raise the high school graduation rate appear to be double beneficial," the authors of the study write. "The quest for greater equity for all young adults would also produce greater efficiency in the use of public resources."

***Baraboo News Republic* calls for school-funding reform in 2009**

The *Baraboo News Republic* started off the new year with a call for a handful of good, sound public policies that will make life better to its readers. Change in the way we fund our public schools was prominent on the list.

"School districts like Baraboo are getting squeezed by a number of factors," the editorial writer pointed out (<http://www.wiscnews.com/bnr/opinion/328533>), "from state-mandated tax limits to a tight economy to

fluctuating energy prices to minimum annual increases in staff wages or benefits." Seeing the referendum process for what it is, the editorial says there must be a better way to fund schools than "provide only the bare minimum and then ask communities to tear themselves apart" trying to find the rest of the cost of a quality education for their children.

The *News Republic* urges groups like WAES to "continue their efforts to push this important project forward." "We hope," the writer says, "we'll see legislators display enough ingenuity and courage" to reform the system.

Citizens fighting Maine's forced school consolidation law

While consolidation is still on the table as a way to deal with small school districts in Wisconsin and across the nation, it isn't going smoothly in Maine where a citizen initiated petition to repeal the state's forced consolidation law has been filed

(http://www.ruraledu.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=beJMIZOCirH&b=4741051&content_id={E2031B03-AB2F-4F38-9AF4-B2A392B7D36E}¬oc=1).

Maine's consolidation law, enacted in 2007, requires all districts with fewer than 2,500 students to choose other districts with which to merge. It hasn't gone well, however, because the law requires "too much to do, too little time (and expertise) to do it," and that the "benefits are unclear or non-existent," according to an analysis of the consolidation debacle.

To keep up with funding and other news about rural school districts and communities, check in with The Rural School and Community Trust at <http://www.ruraledu.org>. You can also subscribe to *Rural Matters*, the groups publication, by clicking the link on the homepage.

School districts continue to cut programs for children

Moving into the 2009-11 legislative session -- burdened as it is with bad economic news -- school districts, school children, and communities continue to face a crisis because of the state's school-funding formula that has been in effect since the early 1990s:

- In the Sheboygan Area School District, the board has announced a hiring freeze, the first in 20 years. According to Superintendent Dr. Joe Sheehan, "We're going to be under budget restraints (from the state) more than we have ever been since I've been here (<http://www.sheboyganpress.com/article/20090121/SHE0101/901210442/1062/SHE01>)."
- The preliminary 2009-10 budget for the Menasha School District shows a \$1.5 million deficit and the potential for teacher lay-offs (<http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20090114/APC0101/901140488/1003/APC01>).
- Janesville School Board members are looking at cuts to administrative staff, along with other actions, as they try to balance the district's 2009-10 budget. Cuts to administration would come despite the district's reputation for comparatively low administrative costs and the fact 22.25 administrative positions have been cut since 2003 (<http://gazetextra.com/news/2009/jan/12/school-officials-face-ax/>).
- Preliminary budget figures for the Ashland School District find a \$115,000 deficit for the next school year (<http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2009/01/13/news/doc496cc63f59b61239187212.txt>).
- The Holmen School District in western Wisconsin is one of many looking at the future of the SAGE program, not because it isn't effective but because tight budgets and the mandated state-funding system divert needed revenues from other programs and services (<http://www.lacrossetribune.com/articles/2009/01/11/news/z00sage11.txt>).

- Merrill school board members have started a discussion of another referendum to provide additional revenue to save cuts to various teacher positions and programs valued at \$765,000 (<http://www.wausaudailyherald.com/article/20090107/WDH0101/901070602/1981>).

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

- Feb. 12 -- School-funding reform discussion with the Sauk County Institute of Leadership (<http://sauk.uwex.edu/cnred/scil.html>), 12:45 p.m., Reedsburg (more details as available)
- Feb. 13 -- School-funding reform discussion with parents at an informal meeting at Kettle Moraine High School (<http://www.kmsd.edu/Highschool.cfm?subpage=107025>) 9 a.m., sponsored by Champions for Excellence (<http://championsforexcellence.googlepages.com/home>)
- March 16 -- School-funding reform discussion with the Dunn County Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net/>), noon, at the Moose Lodge 1584, 720 19th Avenue East, in Menomonie (<http://www.menomonie.com/>)
- March 22 -- School-funding forum, as part of the Multiple ViewUUS Forum series, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., at the Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church (<http://www.obuuc.org/>), 625 College Avenue, Racine (<http://www.cityofracine.org/>)
- April 16 -- School-funding reform discussion with members of the Richland Area Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net/>), 9:30 a.m. at the Country Kitchen Restaurant in the Ramada Inn (http://www.ramada.com/Ramada/control/Booking/property_info?propertyId=11386&bra), 1450 Veterans Drive, Richland Center (<http://www.richlandchamber.com/>)
- May 18 -- School-funding reform discussion with those attending the Citizens Advocacy Project, 11 a.m., Oakwood Village West (http://www.oakwoodvillage.net/default.php?page=29#sec_89), Madison, sponsored by Dane County Advocacy Network Education (for more information call 608-441-7897)

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.