

## **School-funding update for the week of March 24, 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](mailto:tbeebe@excellentschools.org).

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### **School-funding reform is the topic of the day under The Dome**

Since the last e-mail update, there has been a great deal of ink printed, a great number of words said, and a whole lot of video shot about school-funding reform.

It started on Sunday, March 14, when the [Wisconsin State Journal](#) ran a story about the funding problems faced by rural school districts. Most of you won't see anything new in the story. It does, however, reinforce what WAES and others have been saying for years: This is a problem -- to one degree or another -- faced by every school district in the state, which means the solution has to come from state government.

Whatever was in the article ... or the efforts of reformers over the past decade ... seems like it is being heard in offices under the Dome in Madison. On Tuesday, March 16, the [La Crosse Tribune](#) quoted several lawmakers as saying, "We get it and we promise there will be reform in the next session of the Legislature." We've heard that before, but it is nice to see it in print. "In 2011, the school-funding formula will be on the front burner," said [Democratic Rep. Jennifer Shilling](#). From the other side of the aisle, [Republican Rep. Mike Huebsch](#) said, "The funding formula is the worst thing (lawmakers) could come up with. It's just better than anything anybody else has come up with so far." (He does say "lawmakers," and WAES agrees. Someone, however, might suggest Rep. Huebsch at least take a look at the half dozen or so reform plans that have been put on the table).

On March 8, Governor Jim Doyle (<http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/>) decided he'd had enough and "quietly dropped a wide-ranging school-funding reform proposal that he has been talking about for more than a year," according to the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#). According to a spokesperson from the Governor's office, Doyle's focus shifted to pursuing federal stimulus and Race to the Top dollars and a lack of interest from legislators. Not so, said [Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker](#): "More finger-pointing on education reforms from the administration without a proposal that has strong public

support isn't going to help Wisconsin students." On March 18, Madison's *Capital Times* added its two-cents worth by saying to the Governor, that's fine, "all Doyle ever did was talk about school-funding reform. He never made any real effort."

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### **Students coming to the front of the school-funding reform effort**

It always seemed strange that the one group not involved with school-funding reform discussions was students ... or at least that's what we thought. Actually, young people know what is being done to them and, all over Wisconsin, are reacting. For example, the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (<http://www.wasc.org/>) is a member of WAES and has made reform a statewide topic of discussion.

That is by no means the end of it, however. Jake Berg has produced an eight-minute video entitled "The Library is Closed" that tells the story of what is happening in schools from one end of the state to the other (<http://www.excellentschools.org>). Jake, a junior in the telecommunications program and Waukesha West High School, entered the video in the C-Span Student Cam Competition. It is must viewing for everyone -- especially legislators who can't find a good enough reason to reform Wisconsin's school-finance crisis.

Hundreds of students, parents, and staff from Milwaukee Public Schools turned out at a board meeting to voice their opposition to potential cuts but also urge changes at the state level. Students also led the way to deliver the same message to the school board in South Milwaukee, where "they're working on developing a coalition to change how state funding is determined."

To see Jake's video and find out more about what happened in MPS and South Milwaukee go to the WAES website at <http://www.excellentschools.org>.

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### **"Category 5" crisis for schools ... "A Penny for Kids" would help**

In terms of funding, what does the future look like for schools in Wisconsin and around the country? [According to a story on MSNBC](#) called "U.S. schools in a 'Category 5' budget crisis," not so good. According to the report, "While the recession has put a squeeze on all types of government programs, none has felt its impact more than education -- the largest item in most states' budgets."

So far, Wisconsin has not decided to address, head-on, that crisis. Not so in other states. Representatives in nine school districts in Illinois have proposed a sales tax for schools that "is sorely needed (<http://www.sj-r.com/news/x531846543/School-district-representatives-agree-on-necessity-of-sales-tax>)." Although the proposal is for a county tax at this time, a referendum is being discussed in Sangamon County. Also in Illinois, Governor Pat Quinn is talking about a 33-percent income tax hike (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/elections/ct-met-quinn-budget-speech-0311-20100310,0,6633962,full.story>), framing "the debate as a choice between finding more money or hurting school children."

In the Badger State, only WAES -- and its supporters -- have proposed additional revenue to help the state's schools and school children through the economic downturn. You can support that effort -- "[A Penny for Kids](#)" -- by going to <http://www.apennyforkids.org> or signing the petition. Once you have done that, send the site to others ... with your recommendation to sign the petition ... and then starting looking around to see what you can do to make "[A Penny for Kids](#)" a reality. For example, the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District (<http://www.mcpasd.k12.wi.us/>) recently endorsed the proposal.

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## **Four-day school week is getting mixed reviews**

There's a new math being considered in a growing number of school districts across the country these days: A four-day week to help close gaping budget holes. As you might expect, however, not everyone is sure it's good for the kids.

State legislators and local school boards are granting greater flexibility to set academic calendars, according to the story in the [Wall Street Journal](#). About 100 districts in 17 states -- out of 15,000 districts nationally -- are trying the shorter week. Some districts say they are turning to the four-day week as a last resort, rather than cutting extra-curriculars or laying off teachers.

There are warnings out there, however. The U.S. Department of Education hasn't taken a position, but says, "generally, we are concerned about financial constraints leading to a reduction in learning time." In addition to possibly hurting education, the four-day week has struck a nerve with groups representing working parents that claim many will have to rethink their career plans if the shorter schedule takes hold.

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## **Brodhead superintendent lays out need for April 6 referendum**

After failing to pass a \$3.6 million referendum to exceed revenue limits in February, the Brodhead School District will try again, April 6, this time to pass a \$1.76 million, three-year vote. Some have questioned the district's motives, and they need help to understand how serious a dilemma the schools of Wisconsin face because of the state's school-funding system.

Brodhead Superintendent Charles Deery published an excellent letter to the community doing just that -- explaining the need for referendum and what will happen should it fail again. It is not loaded with rhetoric or exaggeration. It is an honest attempt to talk to parents, students, and taxpayers (<http://www.brodhead.k12.wi.us/letter.htm>). He talks about how educational costs have exceeded revenue caps and "over time, expenses out pace revenues, and schools have been forced to make cuts to stay with revenue limits and balance their budgets."

Deery explained how revenue limits -- "intended as a short-term mechanism for controlling property taxes" -- have hurt the Brodhead community. The small district in southwestern Wisconsin has cut an average of \$200,000 a year in a way that the "impact to the instructional program has been minimal." Now, however, "all the easy cuts have been made and all the streamlining has been done. Any further cuts will result in serious reductions to the breadth and/or quality of programs we provide for our children" in Brodhead (<http://www.brodhead.k12.wi.us/Referendum/What.htm>).

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## **WAES needs your support to keep working for school-funding reform**

WAES does good work for school funding reform because its members support that good work. Our coalition is dedicated to fixing the mess our kids, schools, and communities are in. We need more members, however, for this work to continue as energetically as it needs to. Renewals and new-member applications have been sent to school districts, teachers organizations, parent and other groups, and individuals. Do what you can to make sure your school district and other groups you belong to are part of WAES.

Since the last e-mail update, WAES has welcomed the following new members: Four Corners Elementary School PTA (<http://www.superior.k12.wi.us/fourcorners/index.php>), the Wisconsin Association of School Nurses (<http://www.wisconsinschoolnurses.org/>) and the school districts of

Lakeland Union High School (<http://www.luhs.k12.wi.us>) and Elmwood (<http://www.elmwood.k12.wi.us/>).

Renewals were received from the following teacher groups: WEAC-Fox Valley (<http://www.weac.org/weacfoxvalley/>), the Green Bay Education Association (<http://www.gbea.org/>), the West Central Education Association (<http://www.weac.org/wcea/>), WEAC (<http://www.weac.org>), Cedar Lake United Educators (<http://www.weac.org/clue/>), the West Suburban Council (<http://www.weac.org/wsc/>), and the Rock Valley Education Professionals (<http://www.weac.org/rvep/>). School district renewals were received from Goodman-Armstrong Creek (<http://goodman.wi.schoolwebpages.com>), New Auburn (<http://www.newauburn.k12.wi.us/>), Phillips (<http://www.phillips.k12.wi.us/>), Reedsville (<http://www.reedsville.k12.wi.us/>), Birchwood (<http://www.birchwood.k12.wi.us/>), Stevens Point (<http://www.wisp.k12.wi.us>), and Superior (<http://www.superior.k12.wi.us/>).

If you want to join WAES, need information to help urge your school district or group to join WAES, or just want to know more, go to <http://www.excellentschools.org> and click on "Join WAES.)

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### **School-funding reform front and center on Wisconsin Eye**

Wisconsin Eye (the Badger State's version of C-Span at <http://www.wisconsinseye.com/>) has been a good vehicle for spreading the word about school-funding reform.

Tom Beebe, WAES's executive director, was the featured guest of Steve Walters' on "Newsmakers." They talked about reform in general, the dire straits Wisconsin schools find themselves in, and "[A Penny for Kids.](#)" The segment can be found at [http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye\\_programming/ARCHIVES-newsmakers.html](http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye_programming/ARCHIVES-newsmakers.html) and then go to the Feb. 22 edition, "Newsmakers: Tom Beebe 'A Penny for Kids.'"

School funding was also the topic of a pair of other recent Wisconsin Eye offerings. On March 3, Walters hosted a panel that said America "threatens its ability to compete in the global economy" because it doesn't invest enough in early childhood education ([http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye\\_programming/ARCHIVES-newsmakers.html](http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye_programming/ARCHIVES-newsmakers.html) and go to March 3). Also, WAES was among groups giving testimony, March 9, at a meeting of the Assembly Committee on Education ([http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye\\_programming/ARCHIVES-asm\\_committee09.html#3314](http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye_programming/ARCHIVES-asm_committee09.html#3314) and go to March 9). The hearing dealt with funding reform bills offered by the Democratic Party's Rural Caucus.

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### **Rep. Schneider says we must pay the price for quality schools**

[Rep. Marlin Schneider](#), a Democrat from Wisconsin Rapids, told his constituents in a March 5 column in [The Oshkosh Northwestern](#) that "at some point, our success in education simply depends on our willingness to pay for it."

The column, which appeared about two weeks after a WAES visit to Nekoosa that was also attended by Rep. Schneider, said that the state and local districts need to "keep working to find ways to be more efficient and effective with school funding.

In the end, though, Rep. Schneider said that won't be enough. "So let us ask ourselves as the taxpayers, parents, voters, and community members ... : Do we keep making cut after cut to our schools for the

short term, or do we draw the line and do what is best for our young people to ensure the future of our nation."

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### **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](mailto:tbeebe@excellentschools.org). Thanks.

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**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.**

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### **School-funding reform calendar**

- April 12 -- School-funding reform discussion in the Plymouth School District (<http://www.plymouth.k12.wi.us/>), 6:30 p.m., Plymouth High School Amphitheater, 125 South Highland Avenue
- April 14 -- School-funding reform discussion with members of the Northern Lakes Conference School Board Association, 6 p.m., at The Clubhouse (<http://www.getfave.com/locations/32751531-goodman-club-house>) in Goodman
- April 20 -- School-funding reform discussion (postponed from March 9) 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 21 -- School-funding reform discussion with students in the Education Leadership Class of Aurora University (<http://www.aurora.edu>) in Williams Bay (more details as they are available)
- 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
- June 19 -- School-funding reform discussion with the members of the Edgewood College Doctoral Program, held at the administration building of the DC Everest School District (<http://www.dce.k12.wi.us/index.html>), 6300 Alderson Street, Weston

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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.*