



Wisconsin Alliance  
for Excellent Schools

## School-funding update

Week of April 14, 2008

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

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### **Just in -- Two more school districts talking dissolution**

School boards in Rio and Montello, both north of Madison, are putting dissolution on their agendas as the result of failed referenda .

In Rio, a \$1.27 million vote to override revenue caps is scheduled for a special election on May 20. A similar referendum was defeated, 501 to 483 in February. "If we don't pass this referendum in May," said district administrator Mark McGuire, "we will be in existence next year and possibly the year after that; it depends on where the boards want to go." In Montello, the board is considering a third override referendum and, as in Rio, officials may consider dissolving the district if another vote fails.

Meanwhile, in a scene reminiscent of watching Nero fiddle while Rome burned, the Legislature passed a law designating a state tartan (which is, by the way, "muted blue with scarlet, gray, black, dark green, dark yellow and dark brown woven in").

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### **Madison's "Mayor Dave" talks about school-funding reform**

In his 2008 state-of-the-city address, Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz praised the city's public schools but sounded the alarm, saying it was time to make sure they continued to provide excellent education to all children. He announced four initiatives, including the "need to work shoulder to shoulder with the schools and the Legislature to reform the state revenue caps that are strangling public education not just in Madison but all over the state

(<http://www.thewheelerreport.com/releases/Apr08/apr9/0409mayordavespeech.pdf>)."

Cieslewicz appeared, recently, at a meeting of the South Metropolitan Planning Council (<http://madisonamps.org/2007/06/26/mayor-dave-on-the-state-finance-system/#comments>) and expanded on the initiative. He said "there can no longer be any doubt that the school funding system is broken beyond repair." The Mayor talked about Madison and other districts being "trapped with a spiral of budget shortfalls and cuts to programming" that are part of "a pattern that has been continuing, and worsening, for a number of years."

His answers to the problem make Mayor Cieslewicz a candidate for honorary membership in WAES. First, he said, Wisconsin needs to make school-funding reform "a central part of our legislative agenda." Second, he called for creation "of a new (funding) system that provides fair and adequate funding for our public schools." He praised Assembly Joint Resolution 35, co-authored by Middleton Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts, saying that until its core principles are achieved, "the turbulence our community experienced during this year's school budget will not only happen again, it will get worse."

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### **State dropping to the middle in terms of per-pupil spending**

Just as school-funding reform advocates have predicted for years, "Wisconsin appears to be well on its way to becoming a middle-of-the-pack state when it comes to the amount of money put into grade school and high school education."

According to the 2005-06 data from the U.S. Census Bureau (table at [http://ftp2.census.gov/govs/school/elsec06\\_sttables.xls](http://ftp2.census.gov/govs/school/elsec06_sttables.xls)), the Badger State ranked 17th highest in the per student amount of taxes paying for K-12 public education. And, the gap between Wisconsin and the national average has narrowed to less than \$400. Only a decade ago, the state ranked 11th and revenue per student was \$800 more than the average. According to the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=734534>), this meshes with other data that "indicate spending on education in Wisconsin remains above the national average but is moving down."

At the same time, student achievement indicators, while also still above the national average, have leveled off.

The school-funding system that has driven the state to the middle of the pack was instituted in 1992. Since that time, school districts throughout the state have been forced to lay-off staff, increase class sizes, cut programs and services, or go to costly and divisive referenda to stay afloat. Members of WAES and others individuals and organizations throughout Wisconsin continue to work to change that system.

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### **Latest, WEAC-WASDA survey finds 94% of districts making cuts**

As the previous story notes, Wisconsin is tumbling toward the middle of the pack in terms of tax dollars spent on public school children. As we all know, that fact is about more than statistics ... it is about what school districts have to do to work under a state-imposed school-funding system that no longer works for children.

That point was driven home again with release of the results of an annual survey done by the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) and the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA). The most telling finding was that 94 percent of the school districts surveyed are now making budget cuts and eliminating programs, services, and staff due to the school funding formula.

The full survey results can be found at <http://www.weac.org/Capitol/2007-08/march08/revcap08.pdf>.

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## **Half referenda failed April 1; 26 districts back to square one**

The mantra of opponents of school-funding reform has long been: "If school districts have to go to referendum, that is a good thing. It shows that the system is working."

That mantra is wrong. First of all, budgeting by referendum is ineffective and inefficient. Second, referendum are costly to hold for municipalities and school districts. Third, in most cases they drive a wedge into the community creating a false choice for voters between holding down property taxes and providing needed revenue for schools and children. Finally, we know that passing a referendum doesn't solve the problem of inadequate and unfair school funding. The system is designed so that any new money coming via a referendum is eventually "used up" and districts must resume the cycle of more referendum, laying off staff, increasing class sizes, and/or cutting programs and services.

Now, we also know that only half of the districts going to referenda are successful and getting even the most basic and short-term relief. On the last election day, April 1, 52 school districts held 61 votes. Thirty (in 26 districts) passed and 31 (in 26 districts) failed (<http://www.madison.com/wsj/home/local/280065>). These results have held virtually consistent since the state's school-funding law went into effect over a decade ago (you can do your own data analysis at [https://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/safr/all\\_referenda.asp](https://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/safr/all_referenda.asp)).

For analysis of the referenda results go the websites of WEAC (<http://www.weac.org/News/2007-08/april08/election.htm>) or Advocates for Madison Public Schools (<http://madisonamps.org/2008/04/05/we-are-not-alone-20/>).

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## **Budget woes for Oshkosh, Washburn, and Menomonee Falls**

And just so no one forgets what is really at stake in this discussion, how about a short tour around the state to find out what's happening in the trenches.

The *Oshkosh Northwestern*, April 10, that the Oshkosh School District is looking for \$1.7 million in cuts from the 2008-09 budget (<http://www.thenorthwestern.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080410/OSH0101/304100015/1128/OSHnews>). The board won't vote on the proposed budget until August. Between now and then, board members will look at several cost-saving efficiencies in an effort to steer clear of program and service cuts. According to Todd Gray, deputy superintendent of business services, "if they (cuts) affect a program, if we can afford to, we'll take it off the list (of cuts)."

One of the districts suffering in the fall-out of the 31 failed votes, April 1, is the Washburn School District (<http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2008/04/10/news/doc47fb776e455ea602830560.txt>).

Its Long-range Planning Committee has already met following the 1,115 to 669 defeat of a \$900,000 recurring referenda to exceed the state-mandated revenue limits. In addition to looking at voters reasons for saying "no," the committee will look at consolidation, becoming part of a unified district, and what was done differently in those referenda that passed. "At current spending levels, Washburn will run out of money in the 2009-10 school year, at which point the state would dissolve the district," according to a news report in the *Ashland Daily Press*.

Confronted with the possibility of a nearly \$1 million shortfall in the next school year, the Menomonee Falls School Board is going ahead with plans to cut staff, reduce supply budgets, and enact other cost-containment measures for the fall (<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=732091>). Board treasurer Tony Cherney said what folks throughout the state have found out -- the present system is a formula for going-out of business: "We may be the last school district there (at the point of cutting programs), be we're there now."

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### **WAES needs your support now more than ever**

Once again, we see that the school-funding news from around Wisconsin is bad for school districts, bad for schools, bad for children ... and bad for our communities. And, it seems obvious that the news will only get worse unless students, parents, educators, business owners, taxpayers, and the rest of us come together to demand changes in the school-funding system.

That is the sole purpose of WAES, and we need your help in getting the job done.

WAES is now an independent, dues-supported, non-profit organization. It needs your support to make sure reform becomes a reality as soon as possible. As more and more school districts move to the brink of fiscal and educational crisis, the coalition's work is more important than ever.

If you haven't joined already, you can help by becoming a WAES member today. Go to [http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/membership\\_statement.pdf](http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/membership_statement.pdf) to join as an individual member. Send your membership statement and dues to Tom Beebe, Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, 315 Maple Street, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538. To get the dues structure for organizations -- or for more information -- contact Tom at 920-650-0525 or [tbeebe@wisconsinsfuture.org](mailto:tbeebe@wisconsinsfuture.org).

You can make a difference.

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### **Organizations from around the state are WAES members**

Organizations that have become dues-paying members of WAES since the last update include:

- Organizations -- League of Women Voters of Wisconsin Education Fund.
- Teacher groups: Racine Area Retired Educators Association.
- Individuals: James Arrowood.
- School Districts: White Lake, Elcho, Westfield, Madison, and Baraboo.

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

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## School-funding reform calendar

- April 19 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the finance class of the education leadership course offered through Edgewood College (<http://www.edgewood.edu/>), 9:30 a.m. in 306 Predolin Hall, 1000 Edgewood College Drive, Madison
- April 19 -- School-funding reform workshop as part of the Northern Leadership Conference of the Wisconsin-AFT (<http://www.aft-wisconsin.org/index.php>) at the Barkers Island Inn and Conference Center in Superior (<http://www.barkersislandinn.com/>)
- April 21 -- School-funding reform presentation for a membership meeting of the Winnebagoland Uniserv (<http://www.weac.org/Winnebagoland/>), 5:30 p.m., 325 Trowbridge Drive, Fond du Lac
- April 25 -- School-funding reform workshop at the Wisconsin PTA Convention (<http://www.wisconsinpta.org/>), 10 a.m., at the Regency Suites in Green Bay (<http://www.regencygb.com/index.php>)
- April 30 -- WAES will have an exhibit table at the annual convention of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://www.wrea.net>), noon to 5 p.m., at the Olympia Resort (<http://www.olympioresort.com/>) in Oconomowoc
- May 7 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of a community meeting, at 7 p.m., in the Benton School District
- May 12 -- School-funding reform presentation for the Elkhorn School District Board of Education, 7 p.m., Elementary School Library (<http://www.elkhorn.k12.wi.us/SchoolsInformation/JacksonElementaryHomePage/tabid/60/Default.aspx>)
- June 20 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the finance class of the education leadership course offered through Edgewood College (<http://www.edgewood.edu/>), 10 a.m., DC Everest School District office (<http://www.dce.k12.wi.us/>)
- Nov. 13 -- School-funding reform presentation at the Wisconsin School Social Workers Association Fall Conference (<http://www.wsswa.org/>) at the Heidel House near Green Lake (<http://www.heidelhouse.com/>)