

School-funding update, Week of April 25, 2011

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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

Press conference offers better way than devastating cuts

Wisconsin's public education community delivered a strong message to the Legislature, April 20: "Budgets are value judgments, and the Governor's proposed budget doesn't reflect the values of our state. It's time to find a better way."

The message was delivered to a large audience at a press conference in the Senate Parlor by a coalition of education groups, parent, student, and religious groups. While acknowledging the fiscal challenges Wisconsin faces, speakers said the budget should not be balanced on the backs of children. The group also presented a host of funding sources that could be used to finance education if the Governor and Legislature wanted to take a different path than the devastating cuts already proposed.

To read more, including State Superintendent Tony Evers' thoughts on the budget, and to see the entire event on Wisconsin Eye go to <http://www.excellentschools.org>.

"There is a better way" makes sense ... and you can help right now

The message of the April 20 press conference referenced above was that there is a better way to address our state budget challenges than the devastating cuts to our children's opportunities to learn and succeed offered by the Governor and the Legislature. It was pointed out that we do face tough choices, but that doesn't mean our state government has to make bad choices. The budget is a value-laden document, and right now Wisconsin's values aren't showing through.

So, your job is to tell the Governor and your legislators -- over and over again until they introduce sensible legislation -- that there is a better way. For example, State Superintendent Tony Evers has offered a good school-funding repair plan (<http://www.fairfundingforourfuture.org>) and WAES has made it better with "A Penny for Kids" (<http://www.apennyforkids.org>). You need to urge that both plans be written into legislation and introduced as soon as possible.

Need some help? Here you go:

- Despite being told that we have no choice but to cut school libraries, get rid of school nurses, slash programs and services, and raise property taxes, there is a better way. Find a road map on how to get there at http://www.excellentschools.org/events/PennyforKids/better_way_roadmap_and_talking_points.pdf.
- Build a coalition in your community to work for "a better way" by contacting WAES to do a presentation and start a discussion. Just contact me or go to http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/Host_presentation.htm. We can start following that road map together today.
- How about wearing your opinion on your sleeve where everyone can see it? Order your "There's A Better Way" T-shirt now at http://www.excellentschools.org/events/PennyforKids/TShirt_order_form.pdf.
- Do you need a feel for the depth and breadth of the budget challenges the state faces? No problem. The Institute for One Wisconsin has published a study to help you with the numbers and the public policy implications. Go to http://onewisconsinnow.pnstate.org/site/R?i=SY2_N4FfFR5ic73LWxUZjQ.
- Over the years, the state has "disinvested" in its public schools. Part of the "better way solution" is to fairly and adequately begin to reinvest in our children, their futures, and our communities. The Institute for Wisconsin's Future (<http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org>) has published the second edition of its "Catalog of Tax Reform Options for Wisconsin (http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org/publications_pdfs/tax/IWF_CAT%20OF%20TAX%20REFORM%202011.pdf)" to help you navigate in that world.

See, there are options for our state to follow. Now it's up to you to make sure that happens.

Devastating budget follows 18 years of school-funding misery

Remember, it's not just about the budget proposed by the Governor for 2011-13. The real devastation for schools and children is that the budget proposal comes on the back of 18 years during which the present school-funding system resulted in a declining share of state support for school costs, cuts to programs and services, and increasing property taxes.

That's why:

- The Oshkosh School Board is looking for options to close a projected \$2.15 million deficit over the next five years <http://www.thenorthwestern.com/article/20110421/OSH0105/110420211/Oshkosh-Area-School-Board-hears-options-close-21-5-million-budget?odyssey=tab|topnews|img|FRONTPAGE>
- The Mosinee School Board was forced to end its outdoor education program for middle schoolers and its elementary Spanish classes <http://www.wausaudailyherald.com/article/20110420/WDH0101/104200808/Mosinee-cuts-classes-reduce-costs?odyssey=tab|topnews|img|FRONTPAGE>
- The Neenah School Board voted to cut over 16 positions for next year <http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20110420/APC0101/104200701/Neenah-school-board-votes-cut-16-1-positions-from-district?odyssey=tab|topnews|img|FRONTPAGE>
- Despite concessions from union, Waupun still cuts 18 teaching positions <http://www.fdlreporter.com/article/20110420/FON0101/104200559/Waupun-School-District-cuts-more-than-18-teaching-posts?odyssey=tab|topnews|img|FRONTPAGE>
- The Barron School District faces a big deficit http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=20459856&BRD=1132&PAG=461&dept_id=157660&rft=6
- After teacher concessions, Tomorrow River still faces \$800,000 deficit <http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/article/20110402/SPJ0101/104020557/Teachers-union-makes-concessions-help-Tomorrow-River-school-deficit?odyssey=mod|newswell|text|SPJ-News|s>

WAES needs your help to keep talking about "a better way"

If the "better way" message is going to get out and take hold throughout Wisconsin, WAES will be the messenger. We need you to make sure our children aren't left behind by the bad choices being made in the name of deficit reduction. In order for that work to continue, WAES needs school districts, teachers' unions, organizations, and individuals to join the effort.

Stevens Point Area Public Schools (<http://www.wisp.k12.wi.us/>) and Kathy Ziingsheim of New Berlin renewed their memberships since the last newsletter. Remember, WAES work is the result of your membership dues. It can't happen any other way and we need your help, now, to make sure that work continues.

Most organizations who have been part of the WAES effort in the past should have their membership renewal forms. If you don't have them, let me know. If your school district or group, or you as an individual, want to join WAES it is simple. Either contact me directly through the contact information below or go to the WAES website and join at <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm>.

WAES member, Beth LaBell, dubbed the "accidental activist"

WAES works because the people in the coalition are vocal, persistent, and effective spokespeople for kids, schools, and communities. Recently, "Third Coast Digest (<http://www.thirdcoastdigest.com>)" ran a feature on the work of Beth LaBell, a new breed of school-funding reformer called an "accidental activist."

Beth, the mom of three boys in the Paris School District and a leader in the Vote YES Paris Committee (an organizational member of WAES), has testified at several hearings, press conferences, and events that have drawn hundreds of people. Beth said she is an "accidental activist" who got involved in her own district and the statewide reform movement, but decided to step it up a notch when Governor Walker unveiled his 2011-13 budget. "I didn't plan to get involved," she said, "but desperate times call for getting out of our comfort zone (<http://thirdcoastdigest.com/2011/04/wisconsin-school-funding-cuts-create-accidental-activists/>)."

Interestingly, Beth and the article's author, Patti Wenzel, point to the resolve, diversity, and skills of the school-funding reform movement across the state. Patti, as an employee of the *Phillips Bee*, covered the movement in northern Wisconsin a decade ago, including "Walk On the Child's Side (http://www.excellentschools.org/events/Walk_June16/walk.htm)," a trip on foot from Butternut to Madison to draw attention to the plight of kids under the state's funding formula.

Former legislator Steve Hilgenberg died, March 27

Steve Hilgenberg, former 51st District Assemblyperson and longtime school-funding reformer died March 27 at his home in Dodgeville after a four-and-one-half year battle with cancer. He was 66.

Hilgenberg served on the Dodgeville School Board for seven years and for three years was a community representative to the Head Start Policy Council. In 2006, he was sworn in to his first term as the Representative from the 51st Assembly District.

According to his obituary (<http://www.gorgenfh.com/hilgenbergsteve.html>), Hilgenberg was "a firm advocate for the betterment of our public schools. He believed that government's most important responsibility is to provide each and every child with an education that they can use to better themselves and improve the quality of life in their communities." Over the years, he worked closely with WAES on "a wide variety of reforms to instill greater fairness in our school-funding system."

Walker's agenda a crusade against public schools, *Tribune* says

When Milwaukee's voucher program was a limited experiment in using public money to help children from low-income families find educational alternatives, WAES found it hard to criticize. Now, however -- after Governor Scott Walker has advertised his intentions to super-size it -- it's time to expose the program as a club in "an ideological crusade against public education."

That's how the *LaCrosse Tribune* characterized the Governor's plans in a recent editorial (http://lacrossetribune.com/tomahjournal/news/opinion/editorial/article_97cd11c6-66c0-11e0-ba62-001cc4c03286.html). According to the paper, "Walker's vouchers have a statewide impact. He's proposing more money for private schools, charter schools, and online schools while making deep and reckless cuts in traditional education."

While admitting that public schools need to absorb cuts -- something WAES would debate given the last 18 years of a broken school-funding system -- those cuts would be a lot less Draconian, the editorial said, "Walker's proposal is more than just trying to balance the state budget, it represents an ideological crusade against public education." We couldn't agree more.

New Baraboo group starts "civil discussion" about schools, funding

If school funding in Wisconsin is ever going to get better, it will be because the people of the Badger State come together and demand change. That seems to be happening. Recently, another new local group formed, started a website, and is working to unite the community around schools and children.

Taxpayers for Baraboo Public Schools, with a website at <http://true-boo.com>, is now up and running. After much criticism of the school district, its teachers, and students the group formed to say it "supports the highest quality education and opportunities for our district's children. We believe it's critical for there to be a civil discussion about education in order for our school district and our community to succeed."

The new group joins others recently formed in Madison, Milwaukee, Stevens Point, and others around Wisconsin. If this is the direction you want to travel, contact me and WAES will help you start the process.

School cuts spur conflict in Michigan

It's not just happening in Wisconsin. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder -- like his counterpart here, Scott Walker -- has proposed significant cut in public school aid.

Michigan was spared the unrest seen in Wisconsin because Snyder decided not to attack the teachers union. Now, however, the battle lines have been drawn over a proposal to cut school funding by 4 percent, "after years of shrinking school budgets that have forced districts to close schools, lay off non-essential staff, and reduce extra-curricular activities

(<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704530204576237082960249762.html>)."

In words reminiscent of those from throughout Wisconsin, Randy Monday, superintendent in Monroe, Mich., said the cuts would cost his district of 6,300 students about \$3.5 million. "It's torture," he said. "I just cut \$3.5 million last year." He expects to lay off about 10 teachers and eliminate the district's Advanced Placement program.

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

- May 10 -- School-funding reform discussion with students in the School Social Work Policy Class at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Helen Bader School of Social Welfare (<http://www4.uwm.edu/hbssw/>), 6 p.m., in Room 361 of Mitchell Hall
- 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

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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