

Week of June 16 -School-funding update

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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@wisconsinsfuture.org.

Good news and not so good news out of Winneconne

Because of the flaws in Wisconsin's school-funding system, more and more communities are forced to go to expensive and divisive referenda in order to operate their public schools. To date, a couple of things are known: The number of votes being taken is increasing and the rate of success is about 50 percent. While a "no" vote tells us that a great many public schools are approaching fiscal and educational crisis, there is also something to be learned in a "yes" vote.

One such lesson comes from Winneconne, where a scaled back referenda to exceed revenue limits by \$880,000 in the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years (a vote on a \$1.19 million and \$1.45 million proposal was defeated in April) was approved 1,645 to 1,116 (<http://www.thenorthwestern.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080604/OSH0101/80603201/1987>).

The good news is the referendum passed and allows the district to cover ongoing labor, transportation, and utility expenses. The not-so-good news is its passage does not eliminate the need for some budget cuts. The board had already identified \$310,000 in cuts for next year and an additional \$260,000 in 2009-10.

Wisconsin's tax ranking drops ... What does it mean?

According to headlines and stories in media across the state, Wisconsin has, for the first time in years, moved off of the Top 10 tax list (<http://www.madison.com/wsj/topstories/288419>). Is that, however, a claim to fame or is it the canary in the mine shaft for those interested in school-funding reform and the protection of the state's public structures that are financed through state and local taxes?

One view is offered by the Institute for Wisconsin's Future (IWF at <http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org>). Executive Director Karen Royster and Research Director Jack Norman wrote in the May 24 *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* that instead of worrying about where the state is in regard to total taxes, we need to pay much more attention to tax fairness (<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=754522>). We "built momentum (in the last legislative session) for smart tax reform that will modernize our out-of-date system and create a fair and efficient method of raising revenue," the pair said. The article went on to talk about recent successes and suggestions for the next session of the Legislature.

On May 29, Norman joined Andrew Reschovsky (<http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/facultystaff/reschovsky-andrew.html>), professor of public affairs and applied economics with the LaFollette Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/>) on Wisconsin Public Radio (<http://www.wpr.org>) to talk about taxes and public spending in Wisconsin. You can hear the complete hour on "Conversations with Joy Cardin" at http://www.wpr.org/webcasting/audioarchives_display.cfm?Code=jca and look for May 29 in the program archives.

Tomah Journal wants candidates to get real about spending cuts

Sometimes, a newspaper editorial hits the nail squarely on the head in its insight and intelligence. June 5, the *Tomah Journal* did just that in an editorial titled, "Cut state spending? Candidates should offer specifics" (<http://www.tomahjournal.com/articles/2008/06/05/opinion/01statespending.txt>). The paper vowed to make sure candidates in the upcoming election who talk about cutting spending are specific about those cuts.

The editorial was an answer to the fact Wisconsin dropped from 10th to 11th in terms of tax ranking. "Tax rankings by themselves have little meaning," the editorial said. "What matters is tax value. Are state and local governments effectively providing public services that are cost-prohibitive for most individuals to purchase on their own? And is Wisconsin upholding its moral responsibility to make sure the poor, sick, and vulnerable aren't doomed to destitution?"

That just about says it all and is the measure of good government ... not just the relative position of tax payments. "Just as politicians who advocate more spending have an obligation to identify which taxes they would raise," the *Journal* says, "aggressive tax-cutters have an obligation to identify the spending they would cut. And, if they can't identify specific cuts, then it's a concession that Wisconsin is making the right choices on taxes and spending."

WAES upgrades website; joins YouTube and Facebook

It will be a while before it is finished, but we are in the process of giving a new look and feel to the WAES website in order to make it more user friendly and, most importantly, valuable to those involved in reforming the way Wisconsin funds its public schools.

At the present time, not much will look different, but that will change. One of the new features is that you can join WAES online and send in your dues with a credit card or with *PayPal*. It should also be easier to sign up for and read the e-mail update and to register for a school-funding reform presentation. Give the site a look-see at <http://www.excellentschools.org>. Let me know what features you feel would make it more valuable for you.

That's not all that's new. WAES has also entered the brave new world of Facebook and YouTube. For those of you using the former, check us out, join up, bring in your friends, use this new and exciting technology to spread the word about school-funding reform, and show your support and network with other people working to change school finance by joining the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools Facebook cause. Also, they say a picture is worth a thousand words. If that's true, then video must be worth a million. WAES is new at it, but go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/beebeets> and, thanks to WAES members and technical folks at Advocates for Madison Public Schools (<http://madisonamps.org/>), see what's going on. Be sure to subscribe to the WAES Channel on YouTube or check back for updates

Sen. Schultz continues to advocate school-funding reform

Too many people think that school-funding reform is all about Republicans vs. Democrats. It's not, and Sen. Dale Schultz, a Republican from Richland Center, is a good example. In a recent column in *The Monroe Evening Times*, he praised the Governor for signaling his willingness to talk about reform and said he looks "forward to joining him to improve how our schools are funded

(<http://www.themonroetimes.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=41&ArticleID=3886&TM=46890.44>)."

Sen. Schultz also offered some good comments on the property tax levy credit, part of the school-funding formula that directs state aid intended for children in classrooms to property taxpayers. "The name is misleading," Schultz said, "because school levy credits actually are payments to municipalities to offset municipal tax levies, and schools never see the money. The shifting of millions of aid dollars to the levy credit meant less in general school aids that go where needs are greatest -- small, rural, and poor school districts ... "

The comments didn't go quite far enough, however, because there are "small, rural, and poor school districts" in some parts of the state -- those with artificially high property values -- that actually do benefit from the levy credit. Because of their high property values, these groups get very little if any state aid. Taxpayers in those districts do, however, get the levy credit. It is, therefore, a big piece of the school budget for many districts.

WAES Wisconsin Adequacy Plan addresses the problems in both types of school districts and looks forward to working with Sen. Schultz and other legislators to actually change what is an unfair and inadequate funding system.

WAES needs your support now more than ever

There's a great deal going on around the country and in Wisconsin that will affect our communities and our families for years to come, but nothing is more important than the the future of our public schools. At a time we need a state school-funding formula that moves our children's education to the next level, however, we have one that is unequal, inadequate, and too complicated. It doesn't work for children. It doesn't work for families, and, it doesn't work for schools.

We need to change the way we fund public schools in Wisconsin and we need to do it soon. If we don't act, we should expect nothing more than the status quo which, for the last 15 years, has been laying off teachers, increasing class sizes, divisive referenda just to run our schools, and cuts in the quality programs and services we used to offer Wisconsin's children. The quality and quantity of education continues to erode in virtually every corner of Wisconsin.

Nothing will change until we demand that the Legislature and the Governor do what is right for children and for taxpayers. That is the sole purpose of WAES -- to make that demand and to work with the people of the state to make it happen.

As an independent, dues-supported, non-profit organization, WAES needs your help to continue this important work. As more and more school districts edge toward the brink of fiscal and educational crisis, this work and your support are more important than ever.

If you haven't joined already, now is the time to join WAES. You can go to our website at <http://www.excellentschools.org> and use PayPal or your credit card. If that doesn't work for you, go to http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/membership_statement.pdf and print the Membership Statement. Fill it out and mail it, along with your check, to 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 Beebe at 920-650-0525 or tbeebe@wisconsinsfuture.org.

You can make a difference.

Yet more proof that early-childhood-education programs work

It isn't something we don't already know, but the latest analysis of a long-running early-childhood-education program for children of low-income families in Chicago suggests economic payoffs from such services that continue well into childhood (<http://www.earlychildhoodfocus.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1854>).

The most recent work reported by the Early Childhood Focus says that attendance in the preschool program for 18 months -- averaging a cost of \$6,692 per child -- generated a return to society of \$47,759 per participant. This figure includes increased taxes on earnings due to educational attainment (\$7,243), savings to the criminal justice system (\$7,130), reductions in school remedial services (\$4,652) and averted tangible costs to crime victims (\$6,127).

This research is recognized by WAES and is included as a key piece in most adequacy funding reform models -- including the *Wisconsin Adequacy Plan* -- that is based on research. At the same

time, it flies in the face of the claims made by some members of the State Legislature arguing against increases in public school revenue.

School-funding reform organization welcomes four new members

WAES welcomed two new members since the last e-mail update. We need your help now, so please consider joining as a dues-paying member of the school-funding reform organization

New members are (you can see the complete list at <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>):

- Individuals: Doug Leuck and Carol Krogmann
- School district: Athens and Cadott

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

- June 19 -- School-funding reform presentation for the Northwoods School Funding Alliance, 7 p.m., at Lakeland Union High School (<http://www.luhs.k12.wi.us/>) in Minocqua (<http://minocqua.org/>)
- 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/>), 6300 Alderson Street, Weston
- July 29 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the School Law and Politics class offered through Marian University (<http://www.mariancollege.edu/>), 9 a.m., Northcentral Technical College (<http://www.ntc.edu/>), Wausau (<http://www.ci.wausau.wi.us/>)
- September 3 -- School-funding reform presentation for the West Allis-West Milwaukee PTA Council, 6:30 p.m., at Parkway, 2930 South Root River Parkway in West Allis
- October 2-3 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the annual conference of the Wisconsin Association of Talented and Gifted (<http://www.watg.org/>), Blue Harbor Resort (<http://www.blueharborresort.com/>), Sheboygan (<http://ci.sheboygan.wi.us/>); more details as the become available
- November 14 -- 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/>)

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@wisconsinfuture.org or 920-650-0525 for details.