

School-funding update for week of July 19

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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.

State aid estimates look no better for 2010-11 school year

Just when you thought things couldn't get any worse, apparently they will. For 17 years, school districts have been forced to cut programs and services to students because of a school-funding formula that no longer works. Then, last summer, Wisconsin passed a budget that actually cut aid to the classroom. As if that wasn't enough, it looks like state aid payments for 2010-11

(http://www.wasb.org/images/stories/advocacy_and_government_relations/state_updates/FY11_July_Aid_Compared_to_FY10-Alpha.pdf) will be no more than they were for 2009-10.

According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/97641409.html>), that status quo means "11 of the 50 public school districts in the four-county area will likely receive at least 10% less general aid ... " In addition, many communities can expect property tax increases because what they don't get in state aid they can raise locally under the state-imposed revenue cap. Similar stories are coming out of the Madison area (http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/article_0c72b1a9-a659-53f3-96a9-450d5cfeca43.html) where the Madison Metropolitan School District could see a 12 percent decline in state aid and 10 other Dane County districts face declines.

This is the school-funding crisis WAES has been talking about (<http://www.excellentschools.org>) ... a revenue crisis over and above the ongoing problems created by the formula itself. The answer is "[A Penny for Kids](http://www.apennyforkids.org)," a one-cent increase in the sales tax to meet, head-on, the crisis, buy some time, and allow legislators to get to work on comprehensive school-funding reform. For more information -- and a chance to sign up in support of "[A Penny for Kids](http://www.apennyforkids.org)" -- go to <http://www.apennyforkids.org>.

DPI announces increased aid to small, rural school districts

Small, mainly rural schools throughout Wisconsin -- 123 or them --- got some good news last week. The Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>) announced \$14.95 million will be distributed in sparsity aid as part of the 2009-11 state budget (http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/eis/pdf/dpinr2010_89.pdf). According to 31st District State Senator Kathleen Vinehout (D-Alma), legislative champion for increasing the sparsity categorical, "This popular categorical aid will help maintain the lifeblood of our rural communities -- our schools (<http://www.legis.wi.gov/senate/sen31/news/Press/2010/pr2010-005.asp>)."

Although the September 2010 allotment will be \$3.5 million more than the previous year, it still falls far short of what is needed to keep small, rural schools and communities vital (<http://www.excellentschools.org>), something Sen. Vinehout reiterated, saying, "Even with the additional dollars, more and more school districts are running into severe financial difficulties" because of the state's school-funding system. For example, many of the same districts that will get the sparsity aid will lose under next year's equalization aid disbursement (see first story). Additionally, a study by the Institute for Wisconsin's Future and WAES (<http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/CostOut.pdf>) -- "Funding Our Future: An Adequacy Model for Wisconsin School Finance" -- explains how a much larger state effort is needed.

Once again, "[A Penny for Kids](http://www.apennyforkids.org)" meets the crisis in the state's small, rural schools while buying time for the comprehensive finance reform referred to by Sen. Vinehout (<http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Senate&district=31>). The breakdown of the dispersal of the one-cent increase in the sales tax calls for a \$35 million bump for transportation and sparsity aid (<http://www.apennyforkids.org/the-need.html>).

National group planning Million Teacher March, July 30

The latest round of budget cuts and lay-offs in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS at <http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt>) have led to some positive steps in the state's largest school district, including several groups coming together to work for a quality education for all of the children in the state's largest school district.

One of the coalitions is associated with SOS Million Teacher March (<http://sosmtm.com>) which is planning a series of events across the country, July 30, that are being organized via social networking tools like Facebook. According to the website it is about "uniting Americans who support education" and is aimed at reaching out to the federal government to help it understand the dire fiscal straits in which the American education system finds itself.

You can reach out to others around the country -- and in the Milwaukee area -- at the group's Facebook site at <http://www.facebook.com/SOSMTMNEWS>.

Consolidation not working, districts turn to collaboration

It's inevitable: As property taxes increase and school districts cut programs and services because of the states school-funding system, more and more communities look to consolidation to get the job done. Unfortunately, it most often doesn't produce as much savings as expected, leading many to look for something else.

Increasingly, school districts are looking at collaboration -- a less radical, more widely accepted approach than consolidation (<http://www.gazettextra.com/news/2010/jul/04/small-districts-look-consolidation/>). According to Albany (<http://www.albany.k12.wi.us/>) Superintendent Steve Guenther, his district is developing cooperative programs with Juda (<http://www.juda.k12.wi.us/>) and Monticello (<http://www.monticello.k12.wi.us/>). "The more we are able to share, the more we're able to save, instead of trying to absorb each other."

The three communities have been working together on an "academic co-op" which could help retain more students who otherwise might leave through open enrollment. It could eventually involve sharing staff, classes, and resources. During the 2010-11 school year, the districts will share a psychologist. Guenther hopes to create a model that could be repeated around the state.

Members join, renew with WAES to continue coalition's good work

We are getting closer to a school-funding system that works for all children, thanks in part to the work of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools. For years, WAES has taken the message of reform to communities all over the state and will continue that work thanks to its dues-paying members.

Since the last e-mail update, the following have renewed their membership in WAES: the school districts of Milwaukee (<http://www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/>), North Lakeland (<http://www.nles.us/>), and Middleton-Cross Plains (<http://www.mcpasd.k12.wi.us/>); the Riverside University High School (Milwaukee) PTSA; and Jackie Woodruff of Madison, Kelly Meredith of Butternut, Kathy Zingsheim of New Berlin, Bev Bradford of Waukesha, and Winnie Doxsie.

Not only is it important for you and your organization, teachers' union, or school district to join WAES, but it is easy. Either contact Tom Beebe at 920-650-0525 or tbeebe@excellentschools.org or go to the website at <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm>. You can join and pay online, and your membership is tax deductible.

Kids aren't blueberries and other educational facts

It is often difficult for some folks to understand why schools can't just "run more efficiently like business does." In other words, it's not that there isn't enough revenue flowing into the system, it's just that school boards, administrators, and teachers don't spend it "wisely."

Well, that's what one successful businessman thought. As a matter of fact, Jamie Vollmer, an ice cream maker known for his blueberry flavor, was so sure of it that he went on the lecture circuit with the message, "If I ran my business the way you people operate your schools, I wouldn't be in business very long." Then, one day, Vollmer was challenged by a teacher who told him he maintained his profit margin by sending back "bad" blueberries, while teachers can't cull their classrooms. "We take them all," the teacher said. "Every one. And that, Mr. Vollmer, is why it's not a business. It's a school."

With that, the room erupted in applause and Mr. Vollmer began his journey (<http://www.jamievollmer.com/>) to being a lecturer for public education. "I have learned," he said, "that a school is not a business. Schools are unable to control the quality of their raw material ... they are constantly mauled by a howling horde of disparate, competing customer groups that would send the best CEO screaming into the night." To read "The Blueberry Story" in its entirety, go to http://www.jamievollmer.com/blueberry_story.html.

School-funding reform update from around the country

School-funding isn't just a hot topic of discussion in Wisconsin. It is also on the radar in states around the country:

- Although the debate still rages, for the first time in 15 years Rhode Island has a funding system that many feel will equitably distribute state aid (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/07/19/37formula.h29.html?tkn=XXBFqIRNttzXI09%2FfVUTXQP4IbmV32nVr1%2B&cmp=clp-ecseclips>) The formula, recently approved by the Legislature and the Governor, establishes a baseline of funding for every student and extra revenue for those children who meet poverty guidelines. "This is about equitable distribution that is consistent, transparent, and understood by everyone," said Deborah A. Gist, Rhode Island's education commissioner.
- A record 174 California school districts have been placed on the state's list of financially troubled education systems. And, the situation is expected to worsen if the Governor's budget cuts to public

education are enacted in the 2010-11 budget (http://www.sacbee.com/2010/06/30/2858759/dan-walters-california-schools.html#storylink=omni_popular#storylink=scinlineshareb). Some, however -- like this columnist -- think schools are on the list "not because the state didn't give them enough money but because (they) spent money they didn't have ... " on things like teachers.

- The National Access Network, an organization tracking public school litigation around the country, notes there are an increasing number of legal actions around the country challenging state aid budget cuts in light of the economic downturn (<http://www.schoolfunding.info/news/litigation/2010-07BudgetCuts.php3>). In Arizona, a lawsuit contends that the Legislature's failure to implement annual inflationary adjustments violates that state's constitution, while in New Jersey plaintiffs have turned to the state Supreme Court claiming the Governor's budget cuts violate specific school-funding court orders.

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

- Sept. 28 -- School-funding reform discussion 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, 4:40 p.m., Room 486, Van Hise Hall, 1220 Linden Drive, Madison
- Sept. 29 -- School-funding reform presentation with attendees at the Parent Leadership Conference, sponsored by the Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>) and held at Monona Terrace (<http://www.mononaterrace.com/>), One John Nolen Drive, Madison
- Oct. 25 -- School-funding reform discussion at the District I Fall Meeting of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://wrea.net/>), Rice Lake (more details as they become available)
- Oct. 26 -- School-funding reform discussion at the District III Fall Meeting of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://wrea.net/>), Marshfield (more details as they become available)
- Oct. 27 -- School-funding reform discussion at the District II Fall Meeting of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://wrea.net/>), Kelly Lake (more details as they become available)
- Oct. 28 -- School-funding reform discussion at the District IV Fall Meeting of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://wrea.net/>), Rice Lake (more details as they become available)
- Oct. 29 -- School-funding reform discussion at the District V Fall Meeting of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (<http://wrea.net/>), Richland Center (more details as they become available)

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.