

School-funding update for the week of July 21, 2008

- **First school-funding reform candidate forum scheduled**
- **Referendum Aug. 19, but Wausaukee still pursues dissolution**
- **Champions for Excellence work in Kettle Moraine**
- **New research brief links funding to academic achievement**
- **Is state's funding system standing in the way of energy efficiency?**
- **Wisconsin needs a simpler and fairer tax system**
- **WAES picks up three new members but more are needed**
- **School-funding reform calendar**

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.

First school-funding reform candidate forum scheduled

Republican or Democrat or Independent -- it doesn't matter, the upcoming election season is critical to any chances for school-funding reform. Every seat in the Assembly and half of those in the Senate are up for grabs, and every candidate must know he or she will be held responsible for fixing the crisis surrounding the funding of Wisconsin's public schools.

Between now and the November election, WAES has pledged to work with communities all over the state make sure the legislators they elect are ready to deal with reform when the next session begins in January of 2009. One opportunity is to host a candidate forum. The first one has been scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 9, and will feature candidates for the 34th Assembly District and the 12th Senate District (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/almanac/sd12.pdf>). A new group -- the Northwoods Alliance for School Funding Reform -- will sponsor the forum. It is set for 7 p.m. in the auditorium of Lakeland Unified High School (<http://www.luhs.k12.wi.us/>) in Minocqua (<http://minocqua.org/>).

The 34th Assembly District is represented by Republican Dan Meyer (<http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=34>), from Eagle River. He will face off with Paul Tubbs, a Democrat from Rhinelander (<http://www.tubbs4assembly.com/>). Former 12th District Senator Roger Breske has moved on. Campaigning to replace him are Democrat Jim Holperin, Conover (<http://holperinsenator.com/>), and Republican Tom Tiffany, Hazelhurst (<http://www.tomtiffany.com/>).

Hopefully, the event sponsored by the Alliance will be the first of many around the state. If your group or organization would like to get involved in the school-funding reform effort by hosting a candidate forum, contact Tom Beebe, WAES (<http://www.excellentschools.org>) executive director, at 920-650-0525 or tbeebe@wisconsinsfuture.org for more information.

Referendum Aug. 19, but Wausaukee still pursues dissolution

Despite approving a third referendum to exceed revenue limits for Aug. 19, the Wausaukee School board voted at its last meeting to keep pursuing dissolution of the school district (<http://www.peshtigotimes.net/?id=9669>). According to board President Dennis Taylor, both were necessary because "it's time for people to make a decision."

The vote to dissolve the district comes on the heels of two failed referenda. The first, for \$4.45 million over the cap for four years, was overwhelmingly defeated in February. Voters said they wanted the board to cut costs. After that vote, the administration, board, and staff froze salaries, reworked insurance, and trimmed staff. A second referendum -- a short-term \$575,000 fix for next year -- was narrowly defeated. The Aug. 19 referendum is a long-term, \$675,000 proposal and its impact has been timed to coincide with the end of the district construction debt obligation.

According to the story in the *Peshtigo Times*, if the referendum fails, the resolution passed at the last board meeting "will almost surely lead to dissolution of the school district effective July 9, 2009."

Champions for Excellence work in Kettle Moraine

As more and more people around Wisconsin become aware of the devastating effects of the state's school-funding plan on young people and their communities, local and regional organizations have sprung up to deliver information, provide training, and serve as jumping off points for folks looking to make a difference and reform the system.

One of those groups was mentioned in the first story in this issue of the e-mail update. The Northwoods Alliance for School Funding Reform recently came together and is sponsoring a candidate forum in the 34th Assembly District on Oct. 9. Another group, at the opposite end of the state, is Champions for Excellence that bills itself as "the community voice for quality education in Kettle Moraine." Its website -- which can be found at <http://championsforexcellence.googlepages.com/home> -- has sections featuring links, elected officials, advocacy, and questions on school funding.

If you represent or know of an organization that is working to reform Wisconsin's school-funding system, let me know so we can make sure to tell other people about it.

New research brief links funding to academic achievement

According to a policy brief just issued by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice (<http://www.greatlakescenter.org/>), many state school funding systems "are often arbitrary and not reflective of reliable research findings on student achievement."

"Strengthening the Link Between Effective School Expenditures and State Funding," was authored by Anthony Rolle, of Texas A&M University. The executive summary can be found at http://www.greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Rolle_Funding_EXEC_SUM.pdf and the full brief is at http://www.greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Rolle_Funding.pdf.

The brief examines which spending categories improve academic quality and identifies obstacles that prevent the adoption, into state funding formulas, of research-based spending guidelines. It then recommends ways to strengthen the link between funding formulas, expense components, and desired academic outcomes.

Is state's funding system standing in the way of energy efficiency?

Another victim of Wisconsin's broken school-funding system might just be the ability of the state's school districts to address environmental issues. The theory goes that the law prevents districts from making the kind of investments in energy efficiency that, in the relatively short-term, could create savings that could be plowed back into the state's classrooms.

According to TJ Mertz, WAES board member and blogger on Advancing Madison Public Schools, because of the "endless cycle of annual budget cuts created by the revenue limits, districts are rarely able to look even one or two years ahead for savings to be realized" by energy efficiency (<http://madisonamps.org/2008/07/08/no-greenbacks-for-green-schools-penny-wise-and-pound-foolish/>).

Mertz points out that some school districts are taking matters into their own hands. He points to Rice Lake (<http://www.ricelake.k12.wi.us/>) where a \$3.88 million referendum was approved to upgrade a 1980's era heating and cooling system. According to Superintendent Paul Vine, "We use the savings to try to maintain and support other student educational programs."

Wisconsin needs a simpler and fairer tax system

Not only schools are suffering because of an outdated funding system. Most of Wisconsin's public structures are feeling the wear and tear of inadequate revenue. If we are going to remain an attractive place to live and work, we have to make sure our tax systems has been modernized and is able to fund the services people need and want.

That was the subject of a column in the *Tomah Journal* (<http://www.tomahjournal.com/articles/2008/07/17/opinion/02vinehoutcolumn.txt>), July 17, written by 31st District Senator Kathleen Vinehout (<http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Senate&district=31>). She was referring specifically to a Supreme Court ruling saying that customized computer software isn't subject to sales tax (<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=771699>). The 4-3 decision could result in the state refunding at estimated \$265 million to companies using such software.

Sen. Vinehout points out that the decision, if we are going to maintain our quality services, including public schools, means a sizable increase in the property tax. "The problem," she says, "may be solved by changing the way our laws are written." She suggests routine studies to examine tax breaks; adoption of the streamlined sales tax on internet sales (as has been done in other states); time limits on tax exemptions, credits, and deductions; and simplification of the tax codes and closing of loopholes. "We need a tax system that ensures everyone pays their fair share and no one pays too much," Vinehout said.

For more information on this court decision or other tax policy news, check out the website of the Institute for Wisconsin's Future (IWF) at <http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org>. In the upper right-hand corner, click on "Fair and Adequate" to see archived newsletters and to sign up for the next issue.

WAES picks up three new members but more are needed

WAES needs your help.

While the number of those paying dues has leveled off, the organization's expenses haven't. Moving into the election campaign season it will be more important than ever to make sure school-funding reform is competing for attention in the public policy arena. WAES has a proven track record of reaching voters in communities all over the state, but it is through a strategy that involves a great deal of time and effort.

The coalition did pick up three new members since the last update: Beverly Bradford, Sara Companik, and the Milwaukee Area Retired Teachers Association. You can see the complete list at <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>).

Your commitment to WAES and to school-funding reform is also needed now ... more than ever. If you haven't joined already, now is the time. 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.

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

- 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
- October 9 -- School-funding forum for candidates in the 34th Assembly District and 12th Senate District (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/almanac/sd12.pdf>), 7 p.m. in the Lakeland Unified High School (<http://www.luhs.k12.wi.us/>) auditorium, Minocqua (<http://minocqua.org/>), sponsored by the Northwoods Alliance for School Funding Reform
- October 30 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the annual AFT-Wisconsin (<http://www.aft-wisconsin.org/>) Convention, Wyndham Milwaukee Airport Hotel and

Convention center (<http://www.wyndham.com/hotels/MKEAP/main.wnt>), 4747 South Howell Avenue, Milwaukee

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

--

Thomas S. Beebe, Outreach Specialist
Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools
315 Maple Street
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538

Cell: 920-650-0525

E-mail: tbeebe@wisconsinsfuture.org

<http://www.excellentschools.org>

<http://www.wisconsinsfuture.org>

"The moral test of a government is how it treats those who are at the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped," --
Hubert Humphrey, 1976