

School-funding update for the week of August 4, 2008

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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.

Let WAES know if you have a 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.

The best way to do that is through a candidate forum

We want to make sure everyone interested in school-funding reform is aware of events around the state and, especially, in their area. If your organization is holding a forum, let me know. If you are aware of a forum, let me know that, too. WAES will make sure your event is advertised both in this e-mail update and on the WAES website. Whether the event is just about school-funding reform or whether it is covering a full range of public policy, it needs to be publicized.

A second forum, this one in Blanchardville (the Pecatonica School District ... <http://www.pecatonica.k12.wi.us/>) has been added to the list.

It will be held at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 15, at the Blanchardville Public Library (<http://www.swls.org/member.br.html>). The forum will feature incumbent 51st District (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/almanac/sd17.pdf>) Assemblyperson Steve Hilbenberg (<http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/contact/legislatorpages.aspx?house=Assembly&district=51>), Dodgeville, and challenger Nathan Russell (<http://www.russellforassembly.com/index.html>), Sauk City. The forum is sponsored by the Pecatonica PTA.

There is also a forum on Thursday, Oct. 9. It 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 event, which 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/>).

Hopefully, this will only be the first of many events 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. You can also use this same contact information to post a forum to the e-mail or website calendars.

Sen. Schultz says "referendum-centric" funding system isn't working

Once again, 17th District State Senator Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) is sounding the call to fix Wisconsin's school-funding system. He recently told the *Dubuque (IA) Telegraph Herald* that "the No. 1 issue people talked to me about was their frustration with the referendums that 'seem to be popping up increasingly' in southwest Wisconsin (<http://www.thonline.com/article.cfm?id=210483>)."

Sen. Schultz said that although the last state budget contained a record-high amount of school aid, most of the revenue went to the school levy credit, a shared revenue program that "benefited wealthier, suburban districts." He said that fact "guarantees that we are going to be going to referendum. And that, in some communities, means divisiveness. It means headaches for local school districts. That's not what people asked me to do. They asked me to have less of referendums and more money for schools."

Calling on Governor Jim Doyle, a Democrat, to "lead the charge" on a whole new school aid-funding formula in the next budget, Sen. Schultz said, "I think people would like to see some alternatives to the current system."

Energy, food costs could cut into Altoona's educational focus

A sad comment on Wisconsin's school-funding system came out of an Altoona School Board meeting earlier this week: "Rising energy and food costs could cut into the school district's ability to focus on teaching in coming years."

According to the story in the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram* (http://www.leadertelegram.com/story-news_local.asp?id=BHD1JBFKEM2), both those areas came in over budget for the district of 1,470 students in western Wisconsin (<http://www.altoona.k12.wi.us/index.html>). Business Manager Kathy Dahl said she expects a 10- to 15-percent hike in food prices in the 2008-09 budget. For the 2007-08 school year, she said that energy costs came in \$90,000 over budget. That much has been added to the upcoming year's budget plus \$66,000 more for future increases to pay for heat, electricity, and bus fuel.

According to the *Leader-Telegram*, Dahl said she'd rather see that money going toward teaching staff salaries, "but we do need to keep the building warm and maintained."

Madison begins exploring need for another referendum

Public forums have been set, next week, to start talking about the need for a referendum to fill the \$8.2 million hole in budget of the Madison Metropolitan School District (<http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/>). The sessions, which will run from 6 to 8 p.m., are Aug. 12 at Warner park and Aug. 14 at Madison Memorial High School (<http://www.madison.com/tct/mad/topstories/299376>).

New Madison Superintendent Dan Nerad is expected to bring his recommendations on the need for a referendum to the school board on Aug. 18 and the board is expected to vote on Aug. 25.

Since the state imposed the present funding system in 1993, the district has cut \$60 million in programs, staffing, and services. Additionally, Nerad has outlined four areas of concentration to further chip away at the projected deficit (\$8.2 million in 2009-10, \$6 million in 2010-11, and \$5.1 million in 2011-12):

additional transportation savings; possible financial savings through lease options; refinancing options for district debts; and exploring reductions that have the least impact on children.

More investment in education is way to lower property taxes, WSJ says

While bemoaning the fact that Wisconsin has the ninth highest property tax in the nation, the *Wisconsin State Journal* editorialized, July 24, that the best way to meet that challenge is to make a larger investment in education (<http://www.madison.com/wsj/home/opinion/297740>).

The *State Journal* was reacting to a study from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (http://www.wistax.org/whats_new/whats%20new%20xp.htm). As a matter of fact, the Alliance study said that the Badger State ranks Number 1 when you account for property tax shifting over the years and just look at the impact on homeowners (minus business, farms, and other untaxed land). Based on ability to pay, the study says that Wisconsin's property tax burden accounts for 4.4 percent of personal income.

"Holding down property taxes won't be easy," the paper said, because reducing it "in a dramatic way is likely to increase other forms of taxation." Instead, the *State Journal* says, "A better approach is to grow the state economy by encouraging, and investing in, technology and education while controlling spending elsewhere. More jobs with higher wages can ease the property tax burden without reducing the quality of basic government services."

Is four-day week coming to a school district near you?

In order to combat increasing costs, school districts across the country are looking at a four-day week. The topic has been in the mix of the discussion about the problems caused by Wisconsin's school-funding formula, but talk has spread far and wide with the crippling increase in fuel costs.

A *Reuters* story on Yahoo.com® says that "cutting out one day of school has been the key to preserving educational programs and staff in parts of Kentucky, New Mexico, and Minnesota, outweighing some parents' concerns ... (http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20080724/us_nm/usa_gasoline_schools_dc)."

Although the shorter school week flies in the face in much research on educational outcomes, districts in Wisconsin and other states are including it in their budget options as a way to save money on transportation, heating, and cooling. The superintendent of Nevada's White Pine County School District, which also faces a 14-percent budget shortfall due to a cut in state funding, said energy costs are now driving the conversation, not education.

It's easy to join WAES and the school-funding reform effort

It's now easier than ever to become a member of WAES. Just go to <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm>, fill out the membership statement, send it in, and pay your dues online. It's that simple to help improve the educational opportunities for every child in Wisconsin.

The coalition did pick up three new members since the last update: the James Madison PTA in Appleton, Rock Valley Education Professionals, and the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC). You can see the complete list at <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>.

That's good. We need new members to not only increase our strength as an organization but to help with WAES' expenses as we take the school-funding reform message to communities all over the state. WAES has a proven track record of reaching far and wide, but it is through a strategy that involves a great deal of time and effort.

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

- August 26 -- 1st Assembly District candidate forum, 6:30 p.m., at the Sturgeon Bay City Hall, 421 Michigan Street (<http://www.sturgeonbaywi.org/>), sponsored by the League of Women voters of Door and Kewaunee Counties
- 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 -- School-funding reform presentation as part of the annual conference of the Wisconsin Association of Talented and Gifted (<http://www.watg.org/>), 1:15 to 2:30 p.m. in the Island Room at the Blue Harbor Resort (<http://www.blueharborresort.com/>), Sheboygan (<http://ci.sheboygan.wi.us/>)
- 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 15 -- School-funding forum for candidates in the 51st Assembly District (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/almanac/sd17.pdf>), 7 p.m. in the Blanchardville Public Library (<http://www.swls.org/member.br.html>), sponsored by the Pecatonica School District (<http://www.pecatonica.k12.wi.us/>) PTA
- 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.