

School-funding update for week of Sept. 28, 2009

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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.

As crisis grows, WAES goes after "Pennies for Kids"

The crisis of funding in Wisconsin's public schools is so deep and so wide that immediate legislative action is needed to just protect the education our children have now—much less the education they deserve in the future.

To address that crisis, WAES has launched "Pennies for Kids," a campaign to raise the sales tax one-cent to help fill the gap in public school funding created by the 2009-11 budget and to try to keep the lid on property taxes. At the same time, WAES will continue to work for comprehensive reform, understanding the long-term answer to the problem is a new, sustainable funding system that recognizes the needs of children and the goal of quality education for every student.

If passed, a one-cent increase in the sales tax will raise about \$830 million annually. According to the plan being worked out by WAES members, the largest portion of that revenue would be devoted to children in classrooms through increases in categorical aid. Additionally, because it would increase the state's share of school aid "Pennies for Kids" would slow increases in property taxes expected in the wake of the most recent state budget. To find out more about this new initiative -- and to find out how you can get involved - - got to <http://www.excellentschools.org>.

Wisconsin faces explosion of kids in poverty

Maybe it could be worse, but it's hard to see how. On the heels of years of declining state support for public schools -- and most recently a state budget that actually cut state aid -- Wisconsin saw, last year, an explosion in the number of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches.

According to a study by the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, the number of students eligible

for subsidized lunches topped off at 37.6 percent last year compared to 30.3 percent in 2000 (http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/article_bf1cb714-a659-11de-832b-001cc4c03286.html). The proportion of low-income students doubled or more than doubled in 47 of 411 public school districts during the period, "reflecting the toll of the worsening economy and what some experts call a growing threat to education in Wisconsin."

The expansion of kids in poverty comes at a time when districts across the state are facing a 3.1-percent overall cut in general state aid, up to as much as 15.8 percent in some districts. "Yet low-income students often need more attention in school to compensate for a lack of academic support and distractions caused by financial problems at home, national research has shown."

As predicted, frustration and anger growing around the state

Has anyone not noticed the incivility which seems to have pervaded the health care debate, the U.S. Congress, and politics in general? Well, stay tuned because it also seems to be seeping into the discussion of public school funding in Wisconsin.

The problem, as it has been for over a decade, is a funding system that is hurting kids and taxpayers and a state government unwilling to do its job and fix the problem. On one hand, we have costs far outstripping the revenue needed to give children excellent educational opportunities. This has led to serious cuts in programs and services in schools. On the other hand, we have state government reducing its share of school aid. Local districts only have one choice -- to increase property taxes. The incivility is growing out of the frustration people feel that it is costing them more to give their children less.

One good example is in Washburn. On the heels of a 9-percent property tax increase from a recently passed referendum, the northwestern Wisconsin school board ... faced with "making up for an unanticipated cut in state aid" ... proposed a 24-percent levy increase. Meeting Sept. 8, the board was presented with a petition saying the increase was "unacceptable

(<http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2009/09/09/news/doc4aa7ca7c08fc1778485637.txt>). And now, the district is trying to find \$350,000 possibly by slashing virtually all of its discretionary spending for such items as all supplies, all travel, all dues and fees, all capital objects and all co-curricular spending (<http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2009/09/22/news/doc4ab8ea644a448312295129.txt>). According to Superintendent Sue Masterson, "This is a life-threatening cut."

That was mild, however, compared to the reaction of some Kenosha residents at last week's annual meeting. The board's request for a 2.1-percent rate increase, which was passed 45 to 19, was met with anger and frustration. Dee Wait said we've "seen taxes go up and up and not a damn thing ... is accomplished. ... And you don't need the school board. Get rid of those yo-yos" (http://www.kenoshanews.com/home/mixing_it_up_on_kusd_tax_levy_budget_6374966.html)."

Manitowoc area school districts "dealing the hand they're dealt"

School funding in Wisconsin is so bad that many newspapers are doing round-ups of how area districts are responding to the complexities, irrationality, and problems with the present finance system. "Reduced state aid, lowered state-imposed revenue limits, and a desire not to raise taxes during difficult economic times are leaving school districts in a tough spot," said Randy Fredrikson, superintendent in Two Rivers. The problems in Two Rivers and other area schools are summarized in the *Manitowoc Herald Times* under the headline "Playing the hand they're dealt

(<http://www.htrnews.com/article/20090913/MAN0101/909130348/1984>)."

- In Manitowoc, the district has made \$1.6 million in cuts, used \$700,000 "in federal stimulus funding to balance its budget, and increased the district's tax levy. According to Superintendent Mark Swanson, all of this is happening in a district that "did not take a big hit in state aid compared to others in the county."
- The report from Two Rivers is that the district has cut nearly \$847,000 and is using \$113,000 in stimulus money but, after passage of the most recent state budget, finds itself facing a \$438,263 shortfall.
- Valders, facing a half-million drop in state aid, will be make it up with a 7-percent property tax increase (\$250,000) and the other half from the district's fund balance.
- Mishicot Superintendent Colleen Timm is looking at a levy increase, stimulus money, and postponing the purchase of a new school bus. Not sure of how they could use the stimulus funds, the district had already cut "many small things."
- It was a whole different story in Reedsville. The difference is that the district passed two referenda last spring -- including one to exceed the revenue caps. With the district's reserves down dramatically, property taxpayers are looking at a 22-percent increase.

Point administrators, board, and support staff agree to pay freeze

The 2009-10 school year is the final year of a \$26.4 million referendum passed four years ago in the Stevens Point School District. In November, the district will be going back to the voters for another \$23.1 million because of the inadequacies of the state's school-funding system. In a move to save a little money for at least one year, and show solidarity with the community, some employees have agreed to pay freezes for the 2010-11 school year.

Administrators, it was reported in the *Stevens Point Journal*, Sept. 4, said they will forgo about \$75,000 in raises due them in the next school year (<http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2009909040593>). The administrative staff consists of 45 people. At the same meeting, the nine school board members also agreed to a pay freeze. All members receive \$3,780, which will remain the same next year.

Most recently, the support services staff agreed to a pay freeze for the 2010-11 school year. That move will save the district between \$14,000 and \$25,000 (<http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/article/20090912/SPJ0101/909120465/-1/archive>). The support staff of 18 people is not under a collective bargaining agreement.

Dunn County Retired Educators Association joins WAES

WAES has welcomed a new partner since the last e-mail update -- the Dunn County Retired Educators Association -- bringing the coalitions total membership to 137 (<http://www.excellentschools.org/about/partners.htm>).

Those individuals and organizations renewing their memberships were Jeff and Carol Krogmann, Price County Citizens Who CARE, the West Allis-West Milwaukee PTA Council, the Chequamegon School District (created by the consolidation of Park Falls and Glidden), Bayland Educators Uniserv, the Richland Area Retired Educators Association, and Ken and and Kim Bates.

WAES is a non-profit organizations that relies on dues to carry the school-funding reform message to audiences around Wisconsin (<http://www.excellentschools.org/calendar/SchoolFundingWorkshop.htm>). Your dues are tax deductible. To sign up online, go to <http://www.excellentschools.org/about/join.htm>, or contact Tom Beebe at 920-650-0525 or tbeebe@excellentschools.org.

Former DPI candidate calls for statewide school-funding referendum

Citing an unprecedented cut in state aid to Wisconsin's schools, Todd Price, Green Party candidate for to lead the Department of Public Instruction in the last election, has called on "the Legislature and the Governor (to) put their money where their mouths are, stop talking about the importance of education, and starting making tough choices for preserving our investments in public education."

Price's call to action was part of a column on FightingBob.com (<http://www.fightingbob.com/article.cfm?articleID=1050>).

"There is no state function more important than funding public education for K-12 students," Price said. "We the people must hold our state leaders accountable for their commitments to our schools. I call for a state referendum on school funding to address the problems in the next fall election."

SAGE is a resounding success for Appleton's poorest children

Just in case anyone needed to be reminded, a recent story in the *Appleton Post Crescent* (<http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20090916/APC0101/909160551>) tells us that funding research-based educational initiatives -- like SAGE for children from poverty -- isn't about throwing money at the problem but is, instead, about doing what is right to educate every child in Wisconsin.

According to the article, "lower class sizes at some of Appleton's poorest schools are helping close the achievement gap for their students." SAGE -- the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education -- is a state program that lowers class sizes to 15-1 in schools that qualify to give educators a better chance at meeting students' needs.

It is working in Appleton. An increased number of SAGE schools scored at or above the state proficient/advanced proficient average; the percentage of SAGE students scoring at the advanced proficient level nearly doubled; and the percent of SAGE school low-income children scoring at the advanced proficient level has more than doubled -- and this group significantly outperformed non-SAGE school low-income students.

Wisconsin families open enrolling children into higher spending districts

For years, the education community in Wisconsin has wondered why families take advantage of the state's open enrollment law that allows students from one district to attend school in another community. A study by University of Wisconsin-Whitewater researchers (<http://www.thewheelerreport.com/releases/sept09/sept16/0916uwwhitewaterconomics.pdf>) has now shed some light on the issue.

Not surprisingly, one of the study's chief findings is that parents often send their children to districts that spend more on students and, presumably, tax more as well. "The main result of our research," said UW-Whitewater economist David Welsch, "indicates that parents of transfer students reside in districts with high property values but low taxes, and they choose to send their children to higher-spending school districts. Another key finding is that children are transferred out of districts with "fewer extra-curricular opportunities."

Welsch explained that they found many parents choose to live in school districts with low taxes but send their children to districts in "a community next door that spends more per pupil, and receive the benefits of that for (their) children." This study comes on the heels of research by the Great Lakes Center for

Education Research and Practice, reported in the e-mail update, Aug. 24, that "potentially high-performing parts of the private school sector are the ones that spend much more than available voucher subsidies. In fact, they spend much more than public schools (http://www.greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Baker_PvtFinance.htm)."

Levy defeated so district eliminates all extra-curricular activities

In Wisconsin, the flattening and now reduction of state aid has led many school districts to cut programs and services and some to ask voters to raise their own property taxes to keep the wolf away from the door. When the cuts continue and voters say "no" -- a scenario some think the Badger State is now moving in to - - drastic actions may be needed. In one Ohio school district that meant getting rid of the entire sports program

(http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/andy_staples/09/16/nosports/index.html?eref=sihpT1).

According to SportsIllustrated.com, the football field lights were dark on Friday because the South-Western City School Board (a district that includes four Ohio high schools) took the unprecedented step of canceling all extra-curricular activities after voters failed to pass -- for the fourth time -- an operating levy, Aug. 4. Now, the four high schools in Ohio's sixth largest school district have no sports, no bands, no drama productions, and no student council.

The issue has turned neighbor against neighbor and caused shouting matches at school board meetings and on street corners. Many fear that if the levy goes down to defeat again, the school board will begin slicing into academic programs and trigger a mass exodus from South-Western. "This community is going to die, said Grove City High School (one of the four in the district) football coach Matt Jordan.

DPI has great glossary of school-funding terms

For many folks, listening to talk about school-funding reform is like studying a foreign language. Phrases like "tertiary aid," "primary cost," and "assessment ratio" aren't things we talk about on a daily basis.

A good WAES member recently raised that issue. He has a point. It is important to understand that one of the problems with the present school-funding system is its complexity. We need to find a simpler system. On the other hand, we do need to understand the terminology of school-funding if we are going to be effective advocates for change.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>) has a great glossary of terms at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/sectj.html>. If you can't find what you need there, send me your question and I'll get it solved ... or, just sign up for a WAES school-funding reform presentation (http://www.excellentschools.org/resources/Host_presentation.htm).

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

- Oct. 8 -- Community school-funding reform discussion in Hartford, sponsored by the Hartford AAUW, 3:30 p.m., at Hartford Union High School (<http://www.huhs.org/>), 805 Cedar Stre0.
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- Oct. 13 -- School-funding reform discussion with the Legislative Committee of the League of Women Voters-Wisconsin (<http://www.lwvwi.org/cms/>)
- Oct. 13 -- Discussion of school-funding reform, sponsored by the Richland County Democratic Party, 7 p.m., in the large lecture hall of Richland Center High School (<http://www.richland.k12.wi.us/HS/index.htm>)
- Oct. 28 -- School-funding reform discussion in the Chequamegon School District (created through the merger of Glidden and Park Falls), 6 p.m., at high school auditorium in Park Falls (<http://www.csdk12.net>), 420 9th Street North
- Nov. 5 -- School-funding reform presentation with the Madison Elementary School PTA (Wauwatosa School District ... <http://www.wauwatosa.k12.wi.us/schools/elementary/madison/>), 6:30 p.m. at the Madison Elementary School Library, 9225 West Glendale Avenue