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Wisconsin Alliance
for Excellent Schools

Solving Wisconsin's school-funding crisis

Throw out the system and just start over

Solving Wisconsin's school-funding crisis shouldn't be this difficult. Other states have done it. We just need to be practical and think out of the box.

The system we have was designed to lower property taxes and, coincidentally, fund schools. It is based on outdated fundamentals and complicated mathematical formulas that can't recognize the reality of our children and the communities in which they live. A district's per-pupil spending is based on what it spent in 1993, minimally adjusted for an inadequate measure of inflation.

We can't tweak, nudge, or reshape this system anymore. It needs to be replaced with a system that is designed to graduate young people ready to take their place in the world. Wisconsin needs a school-funding system that links revenue to reality in our communities, the needs of kids, and what we want children and educators to know and do.

We need to start thinking about what it actually costs to invest in the security, opportunities, and futures of our children and the communities in which they live. It's that simple, really.

If you are building a barn or a house, what is your game plan? First, you envision what you want. You have the building designed and someone decides how much material and labor are needed. Finally, you decide how much it is going to cost. If you can afford it, you build it. If you can't afford it, you downsize your plans.

It's the same with the Adequacy model of school funding. You decide what you want your classrooms to look like, including teachers, safety, technology, early childhood classes, extra-curricular activities, the arts, textbooks and materials—everything we all know makes schools work. Then, we figure out what it costs.

State government's job, according to the Wisconsin Constitution, is to fund our public schools. In Wisconsin as in other states, that's done through a combination of state and local taxes. It can be no other way. If they aren't tax supported, they aren't public. And, if they aren't public schools, they don't do what, historically, we've wanted them to do.

Therefore, the state needs to find adequate funding for public schools. Either that, or lower educational standards. And before we do that, the entire state needs to chime in on what that means to the futures of all of us.

No more tinkering and no more trying to do education on the cheap. We need an entirely new funding system that equips our young people to succeed. If they don't—if our high school graduates can't compete on the world stage—our future as a state is grim.