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Wisconsin Alliance
for Excellent Schools

Solving Wisconsin's school-funding crisis

New system must meet the basic needs

The Wisconsin Supreme Court demands equity in a school-finance system. Revenue distributed to schools, justices said, must be distributed as evenly as possible.

The Court rattled some cages, however, by questioning whether the present system provides enough resources—"adequate" resources, to use the legal term—to educate all children.

To be constitutional, therefore, our funding system must be both *equitable* and *adequate*. The present system isn't and reform must be comprehensive to make sure it is.

First step: Stop thinking about how much schools spend—whether it is too high or too low. Instead, think about what it actually costs to provide a world-class education that will build security and opportunity into Wisconsin's communities. That cost becomes the foundation for a new system, and, if met, defines adequate funding.

Under the existing system, the amount of revenue a district receives for each child is determined by a complex mathematical formula that is based on "last year's spending." It has nothing to do with reality, children, or what we expect schools to do.

By contrast, an Adequacy plan defines the cost of a quality education and multiplies it by the number of students to determine the amount of aid a district gets.

It's simple, it's clean, and it meets the Supreme Court's description of constitutional.

Some districts can more easily reach, through local property taxes, an adequate foundation. It is government's function to find a balance between local effort and state aid—to provide equity.

For example, if the property tax rate now used in each of Wisconsin's 425 school districts is applied to its new foundation amount, that levy will raise a distinct amount of revenue in each community. Under a comprehensive reform plan, state aid would then "fill in" the difference between the foundation and the amount that can be raised locally.

It, too, is simple, clean, and meets the Supreme Court's description of constitutional.

The Supreme Court said a school-finance system must be both equitable and adequate. Ours isn't and we need comprehensive reform if all children are to receive the security and opportunity the Constitution guarantees them.