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Wisconsin Alliance
for Excellent Schools

Solving Wisconsin's school-funding crisis

Meeting the needs of all children, everywhere

Establishing a foundation based on the cost of education meets the needs of “average students” in the “average school districts.” Truly comprehensive reform, however, must meet the needs of every child in every school district.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court makes this concept part of the state Constitution, saying the school-finance system must handle “districts with disproportionate numbers of disabled students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with limited English language skills.”

In other words, these three categories of students aren't “average.” Their needs won't be totally met with the foundation amount. There must be more resources—called categorical aid—in an adequate and equitable system that works for everyone.

Our present system not only doesn't meet all those needs, but it actually undercuts “average students” because districts must cut other programs and services to make up for the state's failure to keep its categorical aid promises.

Therefore, a new school-finance system must increase categorical aid.

Studies and reality also tell us that small, rural school districts have needs other districts don't have. Transportation expenses are high and per-pupil operating costs are well above average.

Yet, children in rural Wisconsin are entitled to the same educational opportunities as those in the suburbs or cities.

In a few cases, it makes sense to save money by merging rural districts. On the other hand, consolidation isn't a silver bullet. Distance learning is helpful, but technology alone isn't enough. The answer is a system that meets disproportionate transportation needs and makes sure even students in small, rural school districts have enough resources.

Sixty percent of the school districts in Wisconsin are losing students. As enrollment declines, so does state aid. The problem for communities is that they can't cut programs and services because that would diminish the quality and quantity of education for those children still in school.

The answer is simple: A cushion for the loss of students. For example, a district in declining enrollment could pick, for aid purposes, its highest enrollment over the past five years.

Wisconsin's school-funding system doesn't work. Kids are being hurt. Tinkering with the present system isn't the answer. What we need is comprehensive reform that meets the needs of all children, all schools, and all communities.