



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
July 21, 2009

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Truth in Budgeting

The strength of today's public education system in Wisconsin sets the course for our state, and shapes our future well-being and prosperity.

Now that the dust is settling on the recently passed state budget, it is time for us to turn a critical eye to the financial state of our public education system. While the public is beginning to understand that many Wisconsin schools are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain quality programs, there are some not-so-well-known facts about school funding that deserve closer scrutiny.

Not-so-well-known Fact #1: The ongoing difficulty of school boards and administrators in making ends meet is not the result of a lack of oversight or innovativeness. Quite the contrary is true. Most schools are in trouble due to 16 years of revenue controls that have curtailed their ability to adequately deal with basic costs, such as fuel, textbooks, technology and utilities.

After 16 years of state-imposed budgetary controls and stagnant or declining state support, boards and administrators have had to make significant budget cuts. School boards are now in the position of having to eliminate critical educational programs, lay off more staff, and further defer necessary school maintenance projects in order to balance their books. These cuts will have long-term negative consequences for our schools and our students, and for the state as a whole.

Not-so-well-known Fact #2: The recently passed state budget further weakens our state's system of public schools by imposing further limitations on revenues. In addition to cutting state aid by 3.1 percent, the revenue controls on schools were also tightened in order to limit property tax increases.

While few programs were spared state budget cuts due to the weak economy, new reductions in state support for public schools, coupled with the limited ability of school districts to raise dollars locally means that it will be even tougher for schools to maintain the same level of services currently provided to students.

The following are some additional not-so-well-known facts about the recently passed state budget:

Not-so-well known Fact #3: While most Wisconsinites take great pride in our state's schools, in the last 15 years Wisconsin's national rank for per-pupil expenditures has declined from 11th to 19th. This is partly because \$800 million dollars that is distributed as state tax credits is categorized as spending for education, but it isn't actually spent on education.

So, while many think the state is picking up two-thirds of the costs of our schools, the level of state support has steadily declined, and today our schools actually receive only a little more than one-half of their support from the state. As a result,

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AFT – Wisconsin
www.aft-wisconsin.org

Fair Aid Coalition

School Administrators
Alliance
www.wsaa.org

Southeastern Wisconsin
Schools Alliance
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Wisconsin Alliance for
Excellent Schools
www.excellentschools.org

Wisconsin Association
of School Boards
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Wisconsin Association
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Administrators
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Wisconsin Education
Association Council
www.weac.org

Wisconsin Parent Teacher
Association (PTA)
www.wisconsinpta.org

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greater responsibility for funding our schools is being shouldered by local property taxpayers.

No-so-well-known Fact #4: If \$900 million in property tax relief credits included as spending for public education were actually allotted to Wisconsin's 864,000 school children, per-pupil expenditures would be \$1,040 more than they are today, and the state would be ranked 12th nationally in per-pupil expenditures, rather than 19th.

Not-so-well-known Fact #5: To make matters worse, the most recently passed state budget added monies to a "poverty aid program" for schools, but schools do not get an additional dime from this, since the program is actually a tax relief program for residents in districts with low-income students.

Throughout the state, there is a growing sense that something needs to be done to fix Wisconsin's broken school funding system. We could start by getting the facts straight on school spending, including how much of that spending is supported by the state.

In these difficult economic times, it is more important than ever that our students receive a quality education, one that prepares them for their future jobs, and the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. The failure to provide our children with a quality education threatens not only their future, but the future well-being and prosperity of our entire state.

The School Finance Network, a statewide coalition of educational and community-oriented organizations, suggests that all stakeholders in the state must have a real debate about school funding reform, and the accounting needs to be set straight.

For more information about the School Finance Network and its plan, go to www.SFNWisconsin.org.

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The School Finance Network, a coalition of individuals and organizations dedicated to finding a better way to fund Wisconsin public schools, is made up of the following groups: AFT–Wisconsin, the Fair Aid Coalition, the School Administrators Alliance, the Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, and the Wisconsin PTA.

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