Sample Letter to Legislators
Regarding JFC Proposal on K-12 Education

Dear **(Legislators)**:

As you prepare to decide how you will vote on the state budget, we write to call to your attention a variety of problems and concerns we have identified with certain items in the K-12 education spending package adopted by the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) and to request changes to these provisions.

As locally elected officials responsible for balancing budgets, we appreciate the difficult choices you, as state elected state officials, have had to make as you address the 2015-17 state budget in a challenging fiscal environment. Understanding those challenges, we appreciate that the JFC package restored the cut to per pupil aid proposed in the first year under the governor's budget, and adds $100 per pupil to per pupil aid in the second year.

Nevertheless, it is disappointing to us that despite the steps the JFC has taken, school budgets will be frozen in the first year and will not keep pace with inflation in the second year. That will force some difficult decisions at the local board table.

We want to be partners with our state policymakers in making sure our students succeed both in school and beyond high school so that we can build our economy with an educated and skilled workforce. We desire a more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with our Legislature.

We are concerned that not only is the current funding model neither sustainable not predictable, but that funding for public school students is slowly eroding, reducing opportunities for students who we are counting on to be the foundation of our state's economic future.

We urgently need to engage everyone in our state in a conversation about reforming the funding mechanism for public schools. We therefore urge you to support convening a task force to begin working on a plan to revise the state's school funding system to provide more sustainable and predictable state funding for schools. We believe the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools convened in 2013 could provide a useful model for approaching this issue.

In making this request, we note that the budget proposal approved by the Joint Finance Committee marks the first time since revenue limits were imposed in 1993-94 that schools have seen no adjustment in those limits in either year of the biennium.

We also note that it also appears that much of the nominal gain in state general aid provided to public schools will be offset by the loss of roughly $48 million over the two-year budget cycle funneled directly from public schools to private and religious schools through expanded private school voucher programs.

Our district will face additional, as yet unknown, losses in state aid due to the creation of special needs vouchers and the expansion of independent charter schools in the JFC proposal. As stewards of public education and the people responsible for approving the local property tax levies to sustain our schools, we find this concerning.

We recognize state resources are tight; however, we had hoped the JFC would pay greater heed to recent public polls indicating that when asked which is more important: reducing property taxes or increasing spending on public schools, voters favored increasing school spending by a 54 percent to 40 percent margin.

According to the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB), the JFC package allocates an additional $319.3 million to property tax relief that is nominally related to public schools (but which doesn't allow for increased school spending) and only $213.4 million to allow for increased public school spending.

Our district has used the authority and flexibilities provided by Act 10 responsibly to regain control over much of the expense side of the budget. **(EXPLAIN HOW YOUR DISTRICT USED THE TOOLS, AND THEN DESCRIBE LOCAL BUDGET CUTS THAT WERE STILL NECESSARY *DESPITE* USING THE TOOLS.)** However, not all of our expenses can be controlled by Act 10. We have asked that resources for the **(DISTRICT ENROLLMENT)** public school students in our school district allow us to keep pace with inflation to help us manage the costs we cannot control through the Act 10 tools.

We are concerned by media reports indicating that while most other states have been increasing spending on public education at an average of 4 percent per year, public school funding in Wisconsin is essentially flat and that Wisconsin will soon be spending less per pupil than the national average.

Wisconsin's constitution establishes that the state responsibility to fund public education at levels sufficient to ensure all students an equal opportunity to learn. We are concerned that we are reaching a point where our state will no longer be meeting this standard.

We find it frustrating and disappointing that a large number of hugely significant policy items were inserted into the budget bill by the JFC without a single public hearing. We urge you to remove these items from the budget and take them up as separate legislation for appropriate vetting and input from the public. These include proposals that will: **(ADD/REMOVE ACCORDING TO YOUR DISTRICT'S PRIORITIES)**

- lead to a "takeover" of the Milwaukee Public Schools by a Commissioner appointed by the Milwaukee County Executive;

- require the Racine school board to draw new election districts for school board members that overrides local election results and the preferences of electors in that local district;
- require school boards to allow home-schooled students, virtual charter school students and private school students to participate in public schools' athletic and extracurricular programs (as well as forbid districts from being a member of an athletic association unless the association permits such pupils to participate in the district's athletic activities);
- modify the date by which a school board must give a teacher or administrator written notice of renewal or nonrenewal of the teacher's or administrator's contract in odd-numbered years in which the biennial state budget is adopted and modify the date for administrators in all years;
- dramatically change the licensure of middle and high school teachers in ways that lower standards and denigrate teacher preparation programs;
- expand independent "2r" charter authorization in a way that deprives up to 177 locally elected school boards of the sole authority to approve charter schools within their districts.

Equally frustrating and disappointing is that certain measures that received a public hearing but were opposed by the WASB (and overwhelmingly opposed by others who testified at public hearings) were inserted into the JFC budget.

One such example is the provision that would not only direct school boards to require high school students to take and pass a 100-question civics/citizenship test in order to graduate but would additionally subject every school board's high school graduation standards policy to approval by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Another example would require the DPI to request a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education to allow the state to approve between three and five assessments, and allow each school district, independent "2r" charter school, and private voucher school to select an assessment to administer each year from the approved list. All students funded by taxpayers, regardless of whether that student is in a district, charter, or choice school, should take the same test.

We urge you to remove these provisions as well.

We ask for your support of public education. We look forward to hearing your position on K-12 funding and these other policy items in the state budget.

Sincerely,

_____School Board

Cc: Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB)