



Moving in the Wrong Direction

Wisconsin's public school funding system is broken and getting worse



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For decades, Wisconsin enjoyed a glowing reputation for outstanding public schools. Years of great leadership created a system that espoused the fundamental principles of the Wisconsin Constitution — that all kids would receive top-notch educational services in as uniform a platform as possible.

Things have changed and we're moving in the wrong direction. The 2015-17 state budget drives Wisconsin public school per-pupil spending below the national average for the first time in recent memory. Some will claim that spending does not determine educational outcomes. However, the best teachers, high-quality curriculum and advanced technology all come with a price tag. Today, Wisconsin's public school children are being removed from a system of uniform funding to one that is inherently unequal — and it's getting worse.

Why do we make this claim? Let's start with what is written in the state Constitution related to funding public schools:

“The legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable; and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years; and no sectarian instruction shall be allowed therein; but the legislature by law may, for the purpose of religious instruction outside the district schools, authorize the release of students during regular school hours.” Wis. Const. art. X, § 3 (emphasis added)

Disparity in school funding has recently increased — essentially signaling to citizens that the state is ignoring its constitutional mandate to establish “uniform” public schools. Wisconsin lawmakers have not only failed to follow the Wisconsin Constitution, but they have also failed to follow the Supreme Court directive in *Vincent v. Voight* (2000). In *Vincent*, the court required the state to account for, with additional funds, “those districts with disproportionate numbers of disabled

students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with limited English language skills.”

Student Poverty

While overall disparity in funding has grown, more troubling is the growth of students living in poverty and the ineffective manner with which the state is addressing it. In the 2008-09 school year, there were 292,699 Wisconsin public school students living in poverty based on the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. In 2014-15, using the same definition, the number of students living in poverty has increased to 361,122.¹

Evidence is overwhelming that schools serving higher percentages of children in poverty have, by large numbers, more low-performing students as measured by the State Report Card. Research clearly shows that children living in poverty need more resources to perform at the same level educationally as children from families of means. However, our state's lack of financial support for school districts educating

Editor's note: This article is an opinion piece from two Wisconsin school district administrators. We thank them for taking the time to share their perspective. We invite school board members and administrators to join in the conversation and to share their vision for public education in Wisconsin. Contact *School News* editor Shelby Anderson at sandersonwasb.org.

SCHOOL FUNDING By the Numbers

23% Increase in the number of students in poverty from 2008-09 to 2014-15.

38% Increase in general inflation in the past 15 years.

14% Increase in general school aid in past 15 years.

\$250 million Amount the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates voucher schools will receive in 2016-17 school year.

\$600-\$800 million Amount voucher schools in the statewide program could receive over the next 10 years, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau

children in poverty is surprising. Although schools with high percentages of students living in poverty need more funding to provide the appropriate services, these schools consistently receive less funding and subsequently offer fewer opportunities for their children.²

Contrast this with the decision made by the National Football League to keep a competitive balance between teams. All teams have a salary cap. Teams with poor records have the highest selection in the draft and play the easiest schedules. And revenue sharing has allowed a small market (poor) team like the Green Bay Packers to compete and thrive. We contend this is the “level playing field” we should be offering our children.

Instead, resources for schools serving higher percentages of children living in poverty, students with special needs and students with limited English skill is lacking. The

disparity continues to increase for these schools, their children and families.³ Our once heralded public school system has been forced to endure severe budget cuts at a time when sensible economic stewardship should have enlightened the path to increase investment in our children.

In a recent article from *Brookings*, a collection of research disputes the notion that money doesn't matter in education. In fact, recent studies find by increasing per-pupil spending by 10 percent during students' K-12 years, high school graduation rates for children of poverty increase by 10 percent. The increase in student performance is linked to expenditures with respect to staff to student ratio, increased instructional time and increased teacher salaries that attract and retain highly qualified teachers.⁴

Where is the Money?

Many of you reading this article will probably be thinking, “tell me something I don't know already.” Again this question needs to be asked of those making the decisions in Madison: Why are you making it harder and harder for public schools to have the resources necessary to teach the children we need to become the future workers and business leaders?

The answer we receive from our representatives in Madison is: “there is no money.” Let's take a straightforward look at that response.

The tax levy credit, money garnered from the state's citizens through sales and income taxes and credited to property owners to reduce property taxes (the higher the property wealth, the more credit you receive) is now over \$1 billion each year. The tax levy credit is considered public school funding from the state, but no school or student receives dollars from that program. It goes to property taxpayers proportionally to the taxes owed. About 25 percent of the levy credit flows to out-of-state residents and those with second homes in the state.⁵ While general

inflation has increased about 38 percent in the past 15 years, general school aid has increased by 14 percent; special education aid has increased by 17 percent; poverty aid has remained flat, and aid to schools serving large numbers of English language learners has declined. Nevertheless, the property tax levy credit has doubled over the same time period.⁶

Vouchers have become a political paycheck in Wisconsin, and private schools are now receiving money from the state's general aid to public schools to pay for private, parochial education. Research has proven, in multiple studies, voucher school students do no better on virtually any measurement of educational growth. In some cases, voucher school do worse.⁷ The political momentum is to continue to push taxpayer-funded religious school vouchers and worry about better educational outcomes at some point in the future. Voucher advocates argue that every parent has a right to send their child to the school of their choice. They have that right, just not at the expense of the public education system. Wisconsin taxpayers cannot afford to fund two school systems. The non-partisan Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates the payments to all voucher schools will be about \$250 million in the 2016-17 school year and \$600 – \$800 million will be spent just on voucher schools in the statewide program over the next 10 years. At the same time, there have been budget cuts to our public schools and additional limits proposed on the already restricted ability for school boards to raise revenues locally.

School leaders need to talk with parents and community members about the investment value of our public school systems. Public schools are the heart of our communities, strengthening the foundation of our society. Parents and community members strongly support public schools as was demonstrated at this year's public Joint Finance Committee meetings. However, the strength of our once great and heralded public



education system has been damaged. School board members, staff, parents, community members, local businesses, foundations, school teams and clubs must come together to support our public schools.

■ What are the Solutions?

It's really not all that complicated.

- Follow the state Constitution regarding the establishment of public schools that are uniform as practical by supporting a funding mechanism that provides a level playing field for children and taxpayers.
- Provide the resources to allow schools, no matter their property



wealth or income level, to have resources that keep up with inflation.

- Provide opportunities for rural districts and districts that are low-spending, and/or have high percentages of children in poverty, special needs, or English language learners to enhance revenue to provide the services needed to prepare the next generation of citizens and improve Wisconsin's economy.
- Stop funding out-of-state and second home owners with levy credits.
- Stop spending money on voucher schools.



Invite your community to contact their lawmakers to let them know we need to shape legislative decisions instead of being forced to react to massive changes that come out in the state budget. Good governance is in the open, subject to debate, and invites compromise. We are reasonable people and realize there is only so much money to go around.

We each have a choice of rallying for public schools or allow, what we believe to be shameful and unconstitutional, the dismantling of our public school system. ■

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