

EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION CENTER

School District of West Allis - West Milwaukee, et al.

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April 11, 2011

Dear Joint Finance Members, Co-Chairs Senator Darling and Representative Voss:

As Superintendent of the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District, I am writing to bring to your attention some of the issues we feel are important to convey to you with regard to the 2011-2013 State Budget Proposal and public education.

Just like states across our nation, Wisconsin faces fiscal challenges that will require difficult decisions. This state budget document must truly reflect the values of our state. It must reflect Wisconsin's deep commitment to protecting the most valuable part of our future...our children. Where some may see conflict between these values, Wisconsin has always kept them closely aligned.

Therefore, it is imperative that the Legislature pursue a balanced approach to crafting this state budget. There is no justice to be found in the biennium cutting \$1.7 billion from public schools, while adding over \$400 million more to the state transportation and providing \$200 million in tax breaks to investors and corporations. It is understood that there needs to be significant cuts in this budget; however, meaningful shared sacrifice in resolving our fiscal challenges must include considering a range of revenue options, directing limited new revenues into our area of greatest need, and taking a more balanced approach to program/departmental cuts.

The Governor held a news conference on March 16, 2011, to discuss his biennial 2011-13 budget proposal and the potential financial impact the budget would have on public school districts. The concern that exists is with the Governor's assessment that school districts will be able to balance their budgets based solely upon the reduction in WRS and health care payments. What the Governor failed to mention is that with the lowering of school revenue limits and reduction in per pupil aid, districts like West Allis-West Milwaukee will not be able to balance their budgets. Our budget shortfall will still be around \$5 million dollars (out of an original estimation of approximately \$9.5 million), even with the increase in payments by our employees that I previously mentioned.

I know we all have a common goal of having outstanding public schools in Wisconsin. Therefore, please consider the following:

- It is imperative that SAGE and 4-year-old Kindergarten funding be kept intact (at a minimum) at the level proposed in the 2011 – 13 Governor's biennial budget proposal. These two programs set the foundation for learning. Research shows that early intervention sets the stage for future achievements, growth, and success of our children.
- The 10 percent reduction on Poverty Aid and Bilingual/Bicultural Aid presents a significant concern. Poverty is increasing both state-wide and in our district. As our demographics change significantly the low socio-economic status of our constituents continues to increase in the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District. This is one of the most needed areas of financial assistance in our district, as one of our schools has 94 percent of its students on free or reduced priced meals, two other schools with 84 percent of its students qualifying, with other schools coming in not too far behind

- Special Education costs continue to increase. Without additional dollars in this area it will be a challenge to keep pace with state and federal requirements. Therefore, by only maintaining the current funding levels, we are essentially getting less money due to the offset of the increased uncontrollable costs.
- In addition we would ask that you also create flexibility for the following Special Education adjustments:
 - Allow siblings to ride on Special Education buses without financial penalty to the district.
 - Allow Special Education Students to be prorated to ride on regular education buses.
 - Allow teacher reimbursement for regular education classroom teachers with dual certification.
 - Allow specialists in areas of Reading and Math to replace Special Education Teachers and Districts to realize full funding reimbursement.
- Allow school districts to move the funding for all extra co-curricular, athletics and activities from Fund 10 (General Fund), where it currently is, to Fund 80 (Recreation and Community Services Fund), as this will allow for more flexibility and transparency. Fund 80 is where all programs that are held beyond the normal student day are currently funded which fits the definition of co-curricular, athletics and activities.
- Increase flexibility of a broader use of the Library Fund (Common School Fund) to support technology and classroom learning, especially since the proposal calls for an 11.6 percent cut this coming fiscal year.
- Please consider including hours and minutes in your 180-day proposal and add accountability measures so districts that are meeting identified criteria have some flexibility in this area in order to maintain programs and increase learning opportunities rather than just focusing on seat time.
- Please create a system where Public, Private, Choice, Voucher, and Charter Schools who receive public dollars have to meet the same standards and accountability measures. Public Schools are not afraid of competition but the playing field must be equal:
 - They must have the same mandates (State and Federal Requirements)
 - They must accept all children
 - They must have the same testing measures
 - They must have a standard teacher certification

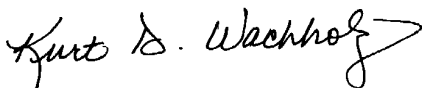
Currently charter, voucher, choice, and private schools are not held to the same accountability as public schools yet they receive public monies. Again, please level the playing field.

- Maintain current income limits and accountability measures in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). At the same time that resources are being drastically reduced for public schools, this budget would spend \$20 million to increase funding for the MPCP, would eliminate income limits for the program, and would eliminate the requirement that all MPCP students take the same state assessments as public school students do. We fail to see how the state can afford to increase funding for this program and create a new subsidy for wealthy Milwaukee families to participate at the same time that the state is cutting \$840 million in aid to public schools. It also begs the question of why the state would eliminate a single common measure of accountability for all students whose education is supported by public dollars.
- Align the new Third Grade Reading Test the Governor is proposing with a growth or value added model such as (MAP) testing. This will provide a measure of actual progress from the beginning through the end of the year and that it can be incorporated into our current learning accountability without creating a separate test implemented through another unfunded mandate.
- Restore local control and revenue limit authority. As the current economic crisis descended, local school boards have exercised frugality and fiscal discipline in providing quality educational programming while protecting property taxpayers. In fact, nearly 23 percent of school districts across the state did not levy to the maximum permitted under law this year. Given that locally-elected school boards best understand community needs and challenges, the legislature should leave the current law on revenue limits unchanged as it costs the state nothing to allow this limited local control over local school budgets.

The Governor's tools are insufficient to "manage" these proposed cuts to public education and the math simply does not add up. This budget shifts the state's deficits onto school districts. This means districts either will have to increase class sizes, cut programs, or reduce staff – all of which will hurt kids and impact our future. Please consider balancing the reductions across all State Departments not just on the backs of our Children...our future.

We all recognize the enormity of the budget challenges facing the state, and that everyone must share in the solution. But, we are counting on you – our elected leaders – to make the tough choices necessary to preserve and protect our core values as a state and as a people. Since the founding of our state, Wisconsin citizens have always prioritized public education, a value enshrined in our constitution. Even in tough times, we must make choices that put our Children First!

Sincerely,



Kurt D. Wachholz, Superintendent
West Allis-West Milwaukee School District