

May 25, 2021

The Honorable Mark Born, Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Wisconsin State Legislature
Room 308 East, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53707

The Honorable Howard Marklein, Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Wisconsin State Legislature
Room 316 East, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Co-Chair Born and Co-Chair Marklein:

As the Joint Committee on Finance (Committee) begins its deliberations this week on the 2021-23 state budget for K-12 education, I would like to reiterate the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) priorities for supporting students, their families, schools, and public libraries throughout the state. The DPI works to ensure each student receives what they need to learn, when they need it, to help them succeed in school and be prepared for life after high school, regardless of their path. I believe this can be accomplished and am highlighting below key priorities for students and schools in Wisconsin.

Special Education

One of the biggest needs expressed by schools is increased state funding to support services for students with disabilities. Fourteen percent of all Wisconsin students are identified as needing special education, located across the state, in every school district. The DPI has created a map so you can see these needs across the state. This interactive map is available at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/policy-budget/special_ed_aid_map.html.

Public schools, under state and federal law, are required to provide each student with disabilities the interventions, supports, and accommodations necessary to meet their individualized educational goals and be successful in school. Yet, with state funding at 28 percent and federal funding at 9 percent, school districts must find the resources to cover 63 percent of the costs they incur to provide required special education services to their students. This often means school boards must make the decision to reduce budgets for general school operations, thereby limiting educational options for all students. This is not sustainable, as was recognized in the last biennial budget. Increasing state support for special education and providing the funding necessary to cover costs required under the law is important and needed. I encourage the Committee to prioritize the state's resources for special education, by providing additional funding to reimburse schools for special education costs at 45 percent in FY22 and 50 percent in FY23, and to provide funding in a sum-sufficient appropriation (\$709,584,700 over the biennium).

Mental Health

Research shows, prior to the COVID pandemic, one in five students in Wisconsin's schools reported facing a mental health issue, and 59 percent (over 500,000) of students reported experiencing more severe mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, or suicidal ideation (2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, administered by DPI for the Centers for Disease Control). With studies showing the pandemic has negatively impacted student mental health, we know the need is growing.

Wisconsin has 424 students for every counselor, 934 students for every psychologist, 1,418 students for every social worker, and 1,850 students for every nurse. We need to do more. Our schools need to provide adequate pupil support staff for all students and school professionals need to be trained to address student mental health needs. To this end, schools need state resources for mental health initiatives included in the department's budget request, including:

- School-based mental health services grants, which helps schools connect students to needed mental health services in collaboration with community partners and mental health agencies (\$7,000,000 over the biennium).
- Mental health and student wellness categorical aid program, to allow reimbursements for all pupil support staff costs (beyond school social workers) and fund a higher proportion of costs (\$46,500,000 over the biennium).
- Mental health related trainings, to include bullying prevention and school violence prevention trainings, and to reach more schools throughout the state (\$1,000,000 over the biennium).

Flexible, Sustained Funding

School districts have expressed the necessity for flexible and sustainable funding to ensure the immediate and future needs of all Wisconsin students are met. The most effective way to do this and avoid over-burdening property taxpayers is to provide regular, predictable increases in school district revenue limits, balanced by increases in state general aids. This means allowing school districts to raise their revenue limit for general school operations with a per-pupil adjustment that recognizes inflationary pressures on costs (\$200 in FY22, \$204 in FY23, and linked to the consumer price index thereafter); and, providing a meaningful increase to the low revenue adjustment threshold (to \$10,250 in FY22 and to \$10,500 in FY23).

Unique to this year is the impact of the steep decreases in fall 2020 student enrollment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Wisconsin saw a three percent decrease in public school enrollment (25,000 students) and an eight percent decrease in private school enrollment (9,500 students), compared to fall 2019. The long term trend of decreasing public school enrollments explains a relatively small portion of the fall 2020 decrease - absent the pandemic, we would have expected to see a decrease of approximately 3,000 students, rather than 25,000. Well over half of the remaining enrollment decrease (12,000 out of 22,000 students) occurred among pre-K, 4K and 5K students - suggesting parents made a decision to delay enrolling their youngest learners in school (public, private, or home-school).

DPI expects to see these children back in schools this coming fall. The schools, which they attend, need to be supported with stable resources, particularly in light of the learning disruptions that occurred. While enrollment decreases are expected to be temporary, the impact will be ongoing,

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as it will factor into revenue limit pupil counts for the next three years. Adopting the department's request to use the greater of the 2020 or 2019 pupil counts, and making the 2020-21 declining enrollment revenue limit exemption a permanent adjustment (one-time basis), will mitigate the detrimental impact of an unusually steep and unplanned decrease in student enrollments this past school year.

Libraries

Wisconsin's public libraries are the cornerstone of our communities and oftentimes a child's first classroom. Increased funding for the state's public library systems will help local libraries respond to community needs, which include supporting students; providing early literacy opportunities; advancing workforce development; providing for lifelong learning; providing access to information and technology; and increasing access to the Internet, electronic content, and services.

Wisconsin's public libraries provide great value to our communities and need funding to support the services they provide (\$6,500,000 over the biennium).

Yes, the federal government has made a significant investment in the form of direct funding to schools to address the disruption in learning that occurred when school buildings had to close to in-person instruction to ensure safety for students, staff, and communities. These federal dollars, however, are limited one-time funds provided to address the impacts and temporary needs of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are not a replacement for the state's overall commitment to funding the continuing needs of K-12 education.

The Committee has an opportunity right now to provide our schools with the needed resources, so every student can graduate college and career ready. As the Committee deliberates the use of state resources for the next two years, I ask that you consider the benefits of investing in maintaining a strong educational system.

Sincerely,



Carolyn Stanford Taylor
State Superintendent

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