



Wisconsin Family Ties

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director – (608) 320-6165; joanne@wifamilyties.org

Advances, and Missed Opportunity, for Student Mental Health in JFC Education Budget

Madison, WI – One in five Wisconsin students faces mental health challenges, and as the school year begins next week, their struggles will go back to school as well. The Joint Finance Committee's long-awaited action on the state budget for the Department of Public Instruction provides welcome support in several crucial areas for students with mental health challenges, including school mental health collaboration grants, mental health consultation funding, per pupil aid, and high cost special education aid. However, Joint Finance declined to take the opportunity to address special education categorical aid, which has not increased in a full decade, even as overall costs have continued to rise.

Governor Walker's budget proposal recommended \$7 million in new investments for grants for connecting youth with mental health services, an increase in school social workers, and increased training for school personnel. The Joint Finance action further enhances the school mental health collaboration grants with an additional \$750,000 and new grant-administration specifications, including family-member participation. Thoughtful integration of clinical services and school support also gained a boost through \$610,000 in new medical-assistance funding for clinical consultation.

"Given the evidence we see every day of the mental health-related struggles and unmet needs facing the children and youth of Wisconsin and their families, school mental health is a welcome new direction for state education funding," said Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director for Wisconsin Family Ties. "The school mental health measures are an important step toward building a more hopeful future."

Meanwhile, students with mental health and behavioral challenges are general-education students first and foremost, and the Joint Finance Committee reaffirmed the Governor's per-pupil aid funding increase recommendations, a necessary measure in the wake of cost increases and previous cuts. On the special education side of the equation, the committee approved \$1.6 million in high-cost special education aid, specifying that school districts will be able to qualify for reimbursement of 90% of eligible prior year costs above \$30,000, up from 70% under current law.

However, a much larger special education funding issue remains unaddressed. Twenty-two years ago, Wisconsin funded 44% of special education costs via the state budget, including for students with mental health needs. Special education funding has not risen in ten years, even as overall costs have increased significantly, eroding the state-funded share to 26%. The decline has put increasing pressure on local communities, which in turn has impacted the quality of supports that students receive. The Joint Finance Committee did not address this slowly-growing catastrophe, continuing the flat-funding of special education categorical aid for yet another biennium.

Wisconsin's family voice for children's mental health

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Juhnke also sounded a note of caution for upcoming budget deliberations, pointing out that an item regarding the Special Needs Scholarship Program appears on next week's agenda. Twenty education and disability organizations, including Wisconsin Family Ties, joined together earlier this summer in opposition to late-breaking proposals for expanding special needs voucher enrollment and adding complexity to the funding mechanism. "Wisconsin must not undermine the forward momentum in this budget with unnecessary and unwarranted special needs voucher add-ons," said Juhnke. "Any expansion of the program would be a step backward for overall support in our public schools, where students with disabilities are covered by federal IDEA rights and protections."

Wisconsin Family Ties, Wisconsin's family voice for children's mental health, is a parent-run nonprofit organization serving families that include children with social, emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges. Founded in 1987, its mission is to change lives by improving children's mental health.

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