

Ray Allen et al: Now is the time to invest in our state's future

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As former classroom instructors, education administrators and school board officials, we know how important it is to invest in the children of this great state. We also appreciate the significant value that comes when educators are empowered with the tools necessary to control costs and make every dollar go further for the sake of students, and when parents have the opportunity to exercise more choices for their kids to access a quality education.

Reforms under 2011 Wisconsin Act 10 have laid the foundation for local schools to better manage their budgets, increase efficiencies, and ensure that our children have access to the best public education possible. The reforms gave school districts more local control to effectively operate and consider targeted strategies, such as raises and promotions, to retain their best and brightest talent. Districts also had new tools at their disposal to tailor health insurance packages that not only avoided slashing benefits or significantly modifying employee costs, but also simultaneously increased choice. The savings realized through Governor Walker's reforms resulted in a budget surplus. The bulk of the surplus will be invested largely back into the classroom as a Reform Dividend.

This Reform Dividend provides the opportunity to make a historic K-12 investment of \$11.5 billion. Governor Walker's 2017-19 budget proposes to increase support to Wisconsin schools by making this historic investment in our students' education and our school classrooms.

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Specifically, the Governor's budget would increase per pupil funding by \$200 or more in each year, bringing total funding for the Wisconsin K-12 system to a record high of \$11.5 billion. Included are significant resources for broadband access, investments in Fabrication Laboratories or Fab Labs, and continued funding of Academic and Career Plans. All of these will greatly expand the opportunities available to Wisconsin students to help them shape their path to success and their future career.

Additionally, the proposal for lifetime licenses allows teachers to focus on critical skills they feel are necessary to advance their careers, while districts will be able to identify the highly motivated teachers during the interview process. This proposal is a win for teachers, districts and, most importantly, students. The budget also increases funding to access quality education through charter and choice schools.

To be clear, no Wisconsin student is left behind in Governor Walker's budget. His plan prioritizes millions in additional investments to support children's mental health, strengthen Milwaukee's youth and families, increase access to summer youth employment experiences, enhance opportunities for students with disabilities, and support rural schools with millions in additional aid.

As members of Governor Walker's cabinet, we are charged with administering agencies that are absolutely vital to the future of this fine state, but our future can only be made brighter by empowering our current and future youth. By making tough but fiscally responsible decisions in the past, our state's financial picture has improved dramatically from the deficits experienced prior to 2011.

Now is the time to continue our significant investment in Wisconsin's future.

— Workforce Development Secretary Ray Allen served three terms on the School Board of the Madison Metropolitan School District; Department of Safety & Professional Services Secretary Laura Gutiérrez is a former schools educator and administrator, most recently at St. Anthony School in Milwaukee; Corrections Secretary Jon Litscher is a former classroom teacher, education administrator and school district superintendent; and Veterans Affairs Secretary Daniel Zimmerman most recently served as School Board Vice President of the Ripon Area School District.