

Testimony Tailgate for Kids: Advocates unite to kick off first of six public budget hearings

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Platteville - Public school advocates join farmers, health care and higher education supporters, and advocates for transportation, the environment and more today to kick off the first of six public hearings on the 2017-2019 Wisconsin biennial budget with a Testimony Tailgate for Kids.

“We are here to send a united message to decision-makers today,” said Heather DuBois Bourenane. “We want to make sure that the people who know and care the most about the issues that impact our communities are heard the loudest and respected the most. Just because we can’t cover all the issues in our two minutes of testimony, doesn’t mean we don’t share the fundamental value of investing in the common good. We stand together for our kids, public schools, and strong communities.”

Co-organizers of the Southeast Budget hearing team Ellen Lindgren (Middleton) and Carlene Bechen (Oregon), are eager to provide room for advocates on all issues to come together around their shared values. “For too long,” said Ellen Lindgren, “We’ve been divided by our issues and working in silos, and we’re tired of being pitted against each other. We are coming together today to say ‘We’re not going to choose between roads or schools, urban or rural, healthcare or parks or clean water. We *can* afford to invest in thriving communities and our children are counting on us to do so.’”

“Budgets are about making choices,” Carlene Bechen adds. “And we call on lawmakers to choose to restore funding to public schools and invest in the

resources our communities need most. It's a simple message: *put kids first.*"

The Testimony Tailgate for Kids is the first in a series of events being planned by a statewide team made up of a larger coalition of grassroots advocates and organizational partners which includes members of the Wisconsin Public Education Network, Wisconsin Farmers Union, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Citizen Action of Wisconsin, League of Women Voters, and many more.

Organizers worked with individuals and groups connected through the Wisconsin Leadership Development Project, which provides relationship-based leadership training to grassroots teams and organizations looking to deepen their community impact. Four regional teams shared the work of organizing local events for each of the six budget hearings, and held a regional training session to prepare over 280 people to present their testimony and amplify their budget concerns locally.

Lindgren explains: "The goal was to make sure that in each region, we could both make sure the most important local concerns about the budget were being heard, but also to connect people who share those concerns to each other and to area groups working on those issues. It's a way to come together and have a stronger voice, while at the same time building relationships and growing teams."

Each of the four regions is led by a team of coordinators and volunteers working together to provide testimony training, budget research, and logistical planning. "Seeing all these busy people come together to stand up for our children on a tight timeline and with so many unknowns is an inspiration," said DuBois Bourenane. "People are speaking loudly and clearly as they go public with their stories and their concerns. Let's hope lawmakers are listening."

The Testimony Tailgate for Kids activities in Platteville include meeting at the yellow school bus for testimony coaching, a refreshment & information station, and a People's Mic where participants are invited to share and practice their testimony to reach a wider audience. Similar events planned by the other three regional teams will follow at the hearings on April 5 (State Fair Park), April 7 (Berlin High School), April 18 (Spooner), April 19 (Ellsworth) and April 21 (Marinette). Those who wish to get involved and learn more are invited to visit <http://www.wisconsinnetwork.org/blog/budget> or <http://wildproj.org/> and follow the **Go Public Wisconsin** pages on facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/GoPublicWI/>) and twitter @GoPublicWI.