

Wisconsin Network: Public school supporters call for results at final blue ribbon commission on School Funding Hearing

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Madison, Wisconsin. Wisconsin public education supporters are uniting at the Capitol today to send a final message to members of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding, which is holding the last of its statewide tour of public hearings in Madison.

“We have attended every single one of these hearings,” said Heather DuBois Bourenane, Executive Director of Wisconsin Public Education Network. “And we have heard superintendents, board members, parents, and teachers say the same thing from one end of the state to the other: our system of school funding is not working and is not fair.”

“We believe every student in every public school in Wisconsin deserves equal access and equal opportunity to receive an equally excellent public education. The state is not currently meeting this obligation. To do so, our public school districts and community members have made clear their needs for a funding formula that is predictable, sustainable, transparent, and adequate to meet student needs.”

These advocates will call on members of the Blue Ribbon Commission to take what they have heard and use it to develop a comprehensive plan – including policy and

budget recommendations, and future legislation – to address the funding inequities in the current system.

“We heard so many unique stories around the state,” DuBois Bourenane said, “but clear patterns emerged. We took careful notes and compiled a summary of the main categories of concerns. The bottom line is that the state is not meeting its moral, legal, or constitutional obligation to our children.”

The bulk of public testimony at Blue Ribbon hearings has revealed five main issues of concern for school leaders and community members:

- Revenue limits, which vary widely and do not correspond to financial need, are unfair and widen the gaps between “have” and “have not” districts.
- The funding formula is broken, overly complicated, and doesn’t do what it’s supposed to. It should be overhauled to adequately meet the most pressing needs of our students (particularly to address poverty, needs of English language learners and students with special needs, mental health issues, and challenges facing rural schools)
- Special education funding is inadequate must be sufficiently restored. Public schools have a mandate to meet the needs of every child, and local communities should not be responsible for paying the lion’s share of these increasing costs.
- Wisconsin’s teacher crisis creates tensions within and between districts, and has resulted in winners and losers as many (and especially rural) districts cannot afford to “compete” with others.
- The growing costs of privatization and the lack of taxpayer transparency for publicly funded private schools is problematic and costly for urban and rural schools alike.

Commission member Dr. Julie Underwood, Susan Engeleiter Prof. of Education Law, Policy & Practice at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, hopes the Commission’s findings will lead to a system where children are treated equitably: “We have heard from the public. We have heard from fiscal experts. We have heard from Wisconsin school administrators. The message is clear; we are falling short on our responsibilities to our children. They deserve better.”

“In the 2011 Budget Repair Bill, schools were cut \$1.6 billion. That cut continues to harm Wisconsin’s children today. The few increases to funding that we have had, have come nowhere near making up for the damage done.”

“In spite of Wisconsin’s history of open and transparent public policy making, school finance is not open and transparent,” Underwood adds. “Transparency is threatened by a complexity that makes it difficult — if not impossible — to understand certain programs. For example, the school levy credit looks like a funding path for public education, when in fact it is a program for property tax relief. Another example is when local school districts have to levy additional taxes if they want to make up for the funds which are sent to the private schools under the state’s various voucher programs. We need truth in budgeting.”

“Wisconsin schools are facing dire levels of unmet needs for students with mental health and behavioral health challenges,” said Joanne Juhnke, policy director for Wisconsin Family Ties. “Ten years of frozen special education funding is ten years too many, and our staffing ratios for school social workers and counselors and psychologists are sadly inadequate. Wisconsin will continue to struggle to build the kinds of school-based relationships that lift our children up when the funding is stretched this thin.”

Pecatonica School District Superintendent Jill Underly shares these concerns, and worries that rural schools are impacted disproportionately by the current system. “I hope that the Blue Ribbon Commission looks at the innate funding inequities that smaller, rural schools in particular face compared to larger more populated school districts with much higher property values that are able to raise revenue without much taxpayer impact,” Underly said. “Our students deserve the same quality of instruction, facilities, and programming – the same opportunities – that their peers receive in higher populated areas. On the other end of that, I sympathize a bit with the faster growing districts that cannot fully plan for growth and are cash-strapped. I also empathize with Green Bay and Milwaukee that have a lower value per student member but have higher needs like poverty and English language learners (ELL).”

Like many others who have testified at public hearings, Madison teacher Andrew Waity worries the combined impact of under-resourcing our public schools while expanding private school tuition subsidies stretches resources to the limit. “The dysfunctional funding system we have creates inequities across our state and puts unnecessary financial strains on local school budgets and taxpayers,” said Waity, President of Madison Teachers, Inc. “This is compounded by policies and budgets on the state level that have cut funding for schools and diverted substantial amounts of money to non-instrumentality charter schools and private school vouchers.”

“People who understand best the challenges facing our schools have spent the past

six months sharing their concerns, and have called on the members of this Commission to produce results. We're here today to let them know we expect them to deliver," said DuBois Bourenane. "There is no mystery surrounding what our schools need to succeed; the mystery is why we haven't provided the resources for them to do so.

Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding co-chair Senator Luther Olsen is quoted in the "No Time to Lose" report, which he co-authored as a member of the National Council of State Legislatures, as saying " I believe we have identified the fundamentals of education that are necessary to succeed in preparing our children to be internationally competitive in today's changing economy. It is imperative that we acknowledge and adopt those fundamentals if we are to be champions in education again."

Wisconsin Public Education Network and its partners call on the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding to take seriously that charge, and the urgency they have heard around the state. Wisconsin can and should be a world champion in providing excellent public education to all students, and how seriously this Commission takes the next stage of its work could determine whether or not it happens.

Wisconsin public schools desperately need funding reform, and Wisconsin calls on this bipartisan Commission to demand and deliver results.

Advocates for students and public schools will hold a short press event at 8:15 am on June 4 in Room 328 NW of the State Capitol. The press conference will be live-streamed on the Wisconsin Public Education Network's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/WisconsinNetwork/>.

Speakers (available to the media) include:

- Heather DuBois Bourenane, Executive Director, Wisconsin Public Education Network
- Julie Underwood, Susan Engeleiter Prof. of Education Law, Policy & Practice, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Jill Underly, Superintendent, Pecatonica Area School District
- Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director, Wisconsin Family Ties

- Andrew Waity, President, Madison Teachers Inc.