

Association for Equity in Funding: Has some questions for elected officials

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“It’s a political staredown.” That’s how one State Capitol insider described the recent education funding proposal from Wisconsin’s Republican-Controlled Joint Finance Committee (JFC). Now we learn that Governor Evers may veto the entire budget, an action that hasn’t happened since at least 1931. Since the Governor has yet to allocate \$2B in federal stimulus funds, we are told that JFC isn’t willing to budget state funds that might duplicate those efforts. One big problem: this does nothing to address longstanding inequities that harm so many students across Wisconsin. Our kids are losing. This is our democracy. Can we keep it if we endlessly block the other side to score political points?

AEF has been collaborating with noted UW-Madison Economist Andrew Rechsovsky. Yesterday, he shared this message: “I calculated the arithmetic average of per pupil revenue limits for (Fiscal year) FY 2011. The average is \$10,632. For each of the next 10 years, I added to this number the legislated annual revenue limit adjustments: -\$554 in FY12, \$50 in FY13, \$75 in FY 14, and so on. In FY21, after adding the \$179 revenue limit adjustment, the average revenue limit was \$10,632—the exact same value as 10 years earlier. To put this fact in perspective, over the same 10 year period, inflation (measured using the CPI) grew by 18.6 percent.” In plain English, schools are being asked to do more with less. Over a decade, while costs have gone up almost 20%, why do low revenue districts struggle to keep the lights on while other districts have enough cushion in their budgets to deal with the shortfalls?

On Monday, we honored the memory of the men and women who gave their lives for our great nation. They did so knowing that for our system of government to

continue, sacrifices needed to be made. They were willing to give their lives. Are our elected officials willing to negotiate with each other to make our funding system more fair? Or, are our children just pawns in a battle over money?

At AEF we work at the grassroots level with people across the political spectrum. One thing is clear: everyone wants fairness in funding for Wisconsin's children. One politically divided school board recently came together after learning how their district has been among the lowest funded for almost three decades. As they debated issues with a voucher school in their community, conservative and liberal board members concurred: a level playing field is a fundamental element of fairness. Why should their public school be funded lower than the rest of the state? What's fair about a system of school finance that leaves so many behind?

The last biennial budget attempted to remedy some of the issues with school funding. Low revenue districts were given more resources, and it helped. Only later did it become clear that with an even larger influx of cash for all districts, that the inequities got worse. The districts at the top got even more revenue than those which had been languishing at the bottom of the revenue system for decades. The legislature's own Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding in 2019 released dozens of recommendations, few have been acted on. Why was the Blue Ribbon Commission created if their work would not be used?

In 2001, the Wisconsin Supreme Court made it clear in *Vincent vs Voight*, that our system of school finance must include adequate funding for students with disabilities, students from low-income homes, and students who are learning English. As AEF analyzes school revenue data and support for these three groups, it's clear that our system has not improved, and is not reflective of the needs that districts across the state experience. How long does the legislature think we will wait for fairness? Is it time for the courts to revisit these issues?

Governing requires cooperation, not endless blockage and refusal to work with the other side. A house divided cannot stand.