

Underly: Calls for equitable investment in public schools

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Underly Calls for Equitable Investment in Public Schools

Dear Co-Chair Born and Co-Chair Marklein:

I appreciate all the effort that you are putting into determining the school aids and programs for the 2021-23 biennium. It's not an easy task and there are many difficult decisions to make with many competing but worthy interests.

When I look at our public schools and libraries and the contributions they make to the future of our state, it appears to me that continuing an investment in our schools and libraries is exactly what is needed at this time. It's important to note that these investments are also very much *what is wanted* by our taxpayers and citizens. We all know that investing in our public school students' futures is investing in our state's and local communities' futures.

As you are well aware, our schools are the hearts and souls of our communities. They serve more purposes than simply "educating kids." Our schools and libraries are our community hubs. They are a critical component to our neighborhoods. They serve rural and urban communities, families, and children, alike, in many different ways, and there is no "one way" that our schools in Wisconsin operate, as each is so unique to its own local circumstances.

During this pandemic, our schools were food distribution sites, and coming out of it, they are vaccination clinics. They are mental health sites for tele-health because they have strong internet access kids may not have at home. They are community centers in normal times, and shelters and funeral gatherings in our saddest and worst moments.

One thing is evident, though. The ever-rising number of referendums signal that school finance in Wisconsin is broken, and that local taxpayers increasingly are shouldering the costs that the state used to provide to our public schools. Citizens rural and urban, in large and small school districts, no matter if they are in well-off areas or places with higher poverty, still support their public schools and they will do whatever it takes to ensure that their community's children receive a well-rounded education and the services they need.

My question is whether it is fair that the State abdicate its responsibility and put this burden on local taxpayers. We know that this results in an unevenness of funding — those communities that have the means to pass referendums and will continue to do so, and those that don't have the means, won't. It's not that those who don't pass referendums don't care about their children. It's because they simply don't have the resources. And this is why inequities in Wisconsin increase. It's why we have opportunity gaps. It's why poverty is the biggest indicator of whether a child will achieve a proficient or advanced reading score.

My request is very simple: Please continue to invest in the programs and the aids that we know work for kids, and increase general school aid and revenue limits to cover increasing costs. When we invest in these programs, we are lifting up entire communities. We are closing opportunity gaps, and therefore closing achievement gaps. We are sending a message to our schools and our kids and our communities from Northland Pines to Neenah to Shiocton to Southwestern, that our kids count.

I would like to draw your attention to numerous items that have been perennial needs in our schools since prior to the bi-partisan Blue Ribbon on School Funding Report was released in 2019, and also items exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Further, the message has been consistent from lawmakers and educators: We want our kids back in school and in the best setting for their learning needs — whether it's in-person or virtual. And in order to do so well and safely, we need to ensure we have the resources to sufficiently address our needs. Our kids and our staff all need to be supported with well-funded systems for schooling and health.

Let me also note that we are grateful in Wisconsin for the support of additional federal resources. Returning Wisconsin federal taxpayer money here to help shore up our pandemic-specific needs is incredibly important. However, those additional resources don't come close to plugging the entire hole in our physical infrastructure needs, our technology needs, our physical, mental, and emotional well-being needs, or our needs to help students recover lost time.

Students with Disabilities Funding and Reimbursement Rates

Our school districts transfer over a billion dollars in un-reimbursed costs from their general operations to cover costs for educating students with disabilities, mandated services, because state and federal special education aid comes nowhere near paying for it. If the state reimbursed at a rate of 50%, that would be hundreds of millions of dollars that would stay in our schools and that our taxpayers would not have to go to referendum to make whole. The larger message is important as well. As kids come into our schools, we serve them. We provide for their educational needs, and we do whatever it takes. But the state reimbursing these needed and mandated programs at a pitiful 28 percent sends the message that not all kids are important nor worth the investment in their educational future. I encourage you to change this.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The past 10 years have seen our teaching ranks dwindle, as many retire and lower numbers of students enter the teaching profession. Further, a beginning teacher needs to work at least 10 years on average before reaching the starting salary of a state legislator in Wisconsin. Again, I feel there is a values statement here: if we value the future of this state and its educational system, and if we want to ensure that we have the best and brightest preparing the future citizens, voters, and economic contributors of Wisconsin, we need to compensate them fairly. We need to increase general school aids and raise revenue limits to provide districts the financial means to pay for their educators. Also, it would be helpful if we could simply rehire annuitants until we are able to stabilize the compensation structure for our educators, especially as we continue to recover from the pandemic.

Mental Health Funding

COVID was an enormous burden on our educational system and our structures: family, business, healthcare, and manufacturing. But what it also did was ravage the mental health of our children and their families. It ravaged our staff, pushing them beyond their capacity as educators and into the role of triage and first responders. I implore the JFC to invest in more mental and emotional health funding for our children, staff, and their families so that we can fully recover from this pandemic. Our schools and school staff are the first responders to our children; and many of our children experienced loss this past year and a half: their school traditions, friendships, the loss of a parent's job, a home, or worse, a loved one. Anxiety and depression among our children was already at record-breaking highs prior to the pandemic. Now is the time to increase, not the time to cut, mental health and health services spending.

Early Childhood Opportunities

As a researcher, as a mother, and as a superintendent, I know what works for our youngest children, and that is high-quality, well-structured, play-based early childhood programming. Children who are set up for success from the youngest ages meet their reading and mathematics goals in elementary school. They have better health and fitness throughout their lives, and they graduate high school ready and prepared for post-secondary endeavors. I have always encouraged us to invest in children at the beginning of their lives rather than pay for it later when we are providing corrections and other supports into adulthood. I encourage the JFC to fund 4K at 100 percent FTE (rather than 60 percent) to incentivize more school districts to provide these important programs to all kids and erase economic barriers to these programs for our highest needs children.

Sparsity Aid, High Cost Transportation Aid, and Declining Enrollment

Plain and simple, there are so many needs and so much inequity. I could provide more examples of the differences between our "have" and "have-not" districts, but the best way to consider it is to look at the differences between school districts as one drives down US 151 from Madison to Dodgeville, or from Interstate 94 from MPS to Elmbrook to Lake Mills. Another way, locally, would be to go from Middleton west on US 14 to Spring Green to Iowa Grant.

Traveling up north in our geographically largest school districts, it is more of the same — our sparsest school districts pay more per student to educate them and they pay more to transport them. Further, declining enrollment erodes any base or financial cushion that we have from year to year. We need sustainable and predictable funding. Without it, there are no guarantees, particularly if a referendum fails, that our community schools, the hearts and souls of our rural communities, will survive another ten years.

I implore you as co-chairs of the Joint Finance Committee to look at what truly matters in this state. Everything stems from a high-quality public school education. As public school graduates yourselves, if you were not afforded that opportunity when you were younger, and if that opportunity were not afforded to your own children, what outcomes in your lives would be different? Now imagine that outcome compounded by a pandemic. Please help us ensure our children, all children, are able to overcome these odds.

Please join me in vocally advocating for our public schools, for our public libraries, for our communities, and for our children.

Sincerely,

Jill K. Underly, Ph.D.
District Administrator - Pecatonica Area School District
Wisconsin State Superintendent-Elect

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