

Wisconsin Education Association Council: It's time to hold the Legislature accountable for funding public schools

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A coalition of organizations and individuals who care about the students in Wisconsin's public schools have filed a lawsuit to compel legislative leaders to meet their constitutional responsibility to adequately and equitably fund public education. WEAC President Peggy Wirtz-Olsen released the following statement regarding the filing:

"As a public school teacher, I've watched my students and colleagues give all they have while the state walks away from its basic duty to fund our schools. Programs to feed children, provide mental health services and innovate in education are cut every year, and that hurts our communities. WEAC is drawing a line in the sand with this lawsuit during Public Schools Week to demand a fix to this broken school funding system, so every child has a real shot at success. Our students, our neighborhoods and our future are too important to shortchange.

"The last state budget process began with a surplus of more than \$4 billion and a recent history of state school funding lagging inflation by more than 20 percent. Record numbers of school districts were going to referendum just to meet their basic costs. Throughout the state, parents, educators, local leaders and interested citizens thought, 'Surely this time the Legislature will do the right thing and fund the schools fairly and adequately.' It didn't.

"Everyone who understands what is happening to our state's public schools and cares about the students inside them knows the state's school funding system has

been broken for a very long time. We also understand that state leaders have a constitutional obligation to fund our schools better, and that a good many of those leaders could not care less about that responsibility.

“While public schools continue to lose ground to inflation, and to most of our neighboring states, unaccountable private voucher schools have enjoyed record funding increases from the state. Among other inequities, the state now funds mandated special education costs at around 35 percent for public schools while it funds special needs vouchers for private schools at close to 100 percent of costs. Private schools receiving special needs vouchers receive three times the reimbursement as public schools, even though 95 percent of the state’s special education students are in public schools. That is a huge problem, and it is also an illustration of what the state Legislature will continue to do if left unchecked.

“The support that local school referendum efforts have received from communities in recent years is heartening but unsustainable. It is no way to fund public schools. Overwhelmingly, we Wisconsinites care about students and know schools are underfunded. We are outraged at state government’s unfair treatment, shortsighted public policy, and general indifference. It shouldn’t take a lawsuit to get elected officials to do the right thing, but when the state is forced to meet its obligations instead of shifting costs onto property taxpayers, students will finally have the public schools they deserve.”