



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

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Statement from the School Administrators Alliance on JFC K-12 Budget Action

MADISON — John Forester, executive director of the School Administrators Alliance, has released the following statement on the K-12 state budget action taken yesterday by the Joint Finance Committee:

“School leaders throughout Wisconsin are appalled at the JFC budget action taken yesterday on K-12 education policy. The ill-conceived school funding decisions made by the committee’s Republican majority will adversely affect the educational opportunities provided to Wisconsin school children in the 2021-23 biennium and for years to come.

All told, the JFC approved just \$128 million in increased funding for schools in its budget plan, less than 10 percent of what Governor Tony Evers proposed in his executive budget. This purposeful defunding of Wisconsin public schools on the heels of an unprecedented public health crisis is completely unjustified, given the \$2.5 billion of state revenues available for the 2021-23 biennial budget. It is also the most egregious example to date of the Wisconsin GOP using Wisconsin school children as political footballs during COVID-19.

Throughout this biennial budget process, Wisconsin school leaders implored state lawmakers to support a dramatic increase in state special education aid and to recognize that all school districts need at least a \$200 per-pupil increase in general revenues in each year of the biennium. School leaders also called for a pupil count mitigation plan to help the 78 percent of districts facing the significant multi-year fiscal consequences of declining enrollment related to COVID-19 this school year. Unfortunately, the JFC majority members ignored these calls.

The JFC budget motion, which ultimately passed on an 11-5 party-line vote, supported no increase in general revenues to support continuing school operations. Instead, the JFC majority opted to set aside \$350 million in a Budget Stabilization Fund for the second year of the biennium. This fund is not even guaranteed to be used for K-12 education and may jeopardize Wisconsin’s ability to receive COVID-19 federal funds for education. The JFC majority also ignored the student count mitigation issue. This combined inaction will be devastating for Wisconsin’s school children and taxpayers.

The committee did advance an \$86 million increase in special education aid, although that number is far less than what is needed to support our most vulnerable learners. This aid increase is just a fraction of the \$1.15 billion that Wisconsin school districts collectively transfer from their general funds to cover the funding gap between required special education costs and current state funding. While other states step up to their moral obligation and fund 100 percent of the cost of special needs services, GOP lawmakers in Wisconsin struggle mightily to support just 30 percent.

But what was most striking about the majority-party JFC budget action was also the most unconscionable. During the committee debate on the proposal, one thing became crystal clear: They completely and callously disregard the significant post-pandemic needs of Wisconsin school children. School leaders and their instructional teams have committed countless hours to develop detailed, multi-year strategic plans to use one-time federal dollars to address the impact of COVID-19 learning disruptions. However, in its budget motion and the ensuing debate, majority JFC members essentially said, ‘Scrap those plans, reverse the intent of those federal COVID relief funds and use those federal monies (instead of state funds) to operate your schools in the 2021-23 biennium.’ What a monumental disservice to Wisconsin students and parents.

Throughout this budget process, we have known that Wisconsin faces two challenging realities affecting our school children. First, as the Wisconsin Policy Forum has pointed out, our state has fallen below the national average in per-pupil spending and has lagged behind the nation when it comes to K-12 spending increases for more than a decade. Second, the COVID-19

pandemic has laid bare the considerable inequities of our school finance system—inequities that disadvantage many of our students because of their zip codes and their significant educational needs. Sadly, as a result of yesterday’s JFC budget action, Wisconsin’s per-pupil spending will likely continue its descent in the national rankings. Our troubling school finance inequities will only get worse.

As we have often said, budgets are about choices. They are about priorities. The choices made by the JFC majority in its budget plan completely disregard the significant post-pandemic needs of Wisconsin school children. They reflect a view that public education is nothing more than an expense to be minimized, not an investment in our most precious resource. The JFC simply does not see our 850,000 public school students as a priority in this budget plan.

We can do better for our children, Wisconsin.”

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The SAA is an alliance of the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA), Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials (WASBO), Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA), Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators (WASPA) and Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services (WCASS). It advocates on behalf of school leaders in their efforts to strengthen Wisconsin’s national leadership in education to ensure that the state’s children receive the highest-quality education possible.