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Joint Finance Committee Fails to Adequately Invest in K-12 Education

JFC leaders take a gamble and may risk losing billions in federal funding through proposed budget

Plain — The Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance WiRSA is extremely concerned with the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) decision to not adequately invest in K-12 education in its 2021-23 biennial budget.

Yesterday, the JFC voted to only invest \$128 million of new state dollars toward K-12 education, which is less than 10 percent of what Governor Evers proposed in his executive budget.

The committee had a great opportunity to show their commitment to children and their education by investing a portion of the estimated revenue of close to \$2 billion available in this biennial budget. Instead, the JFC choose to use minimal state dollars and gamble that one-time federal dollars coming to schools for COVID relief will fill in their budget shortfalls. What many of the members of the JFC continue to fail to acknowledge, even after being told by numerous sources, is that these dollars are specifically targeted for COVID-19 mitigation measures and cannot be used indiscriminately for other budget items. Relying predominately on these one-time dollars could set us up for a financial cliff in the next couple of years.

WiRSA is concerned that the JFC's limited investment in K-12 education may jeopardize the federal stimulus dollars provided to Wisconsin schools. The federal government stipulates that states must maintain their investments in education or risk losing the federal funds altogether. Based on initial estimates, it is questionable if their proposed funding will meet that threshold. Some members of the JFC say they are willing to gamble on the risk of receiving the Federal Dollars they are basing this decision on, even after being told of some of the foreseeable consequences of their actions. In all likelihood they are gambling on a process in which they do not have a full grasp of.

Finally, we are concerned with \$350 million being placed in a Budget Stabilization Fund for the second year of the biennium. This looks like smoke and mirrors because there is no guarantee that this money will ever be spent for education. It is a way to say that this is funding for education, but in reality, it is dollars that can be parked in the so-called rainy-day fund to be used at their discretion.

Wisconsin used to be a leader in education with strong support and backing from both parties. Education should not be political, both parties should want what is best for all of our students and become a leader in education again. With that, the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance urges lawmakers on the JFC to step back and revisit these K-12 education issue and work together to find common ground that help invest in the great students of Wisconsin.

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The Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance (WiRSA) is an organization of 230 plus members and represents 167 rural school districts. WiRSA represents the students, administrators, teachers, school board members and communities of our rural schools.