

Joint Committee on Finance
March 3, 2015

**Testimony of State Superintendent Tony Evers
on the 2015-17 Biennial Budget Bill**

I want to thank the chairs and the committee for the opportunity to be here today to testify on the 2015-17 biennial budget bill. Joining me today is Brian Pahnke, Assistant State Superintendent for Finance and Management and Erin Fath, Budget and Policy Director.

This is my third time in front of this committee to testify on a biennial budget. Unfortunately, my message today echoes what I shared with you in 2011. Again today, I have deep concerns over the impact of the proposed budget on the quality of education for our 870,000 public school students.

I, like many of you, have a personal stake in this: what happens with public education in this budget directly impacts my grandchildren. I urge you to keep our children in mind as you craft your budget priorities this time around.

I recognize that budgeting is about choices. At the same time, our public school system has shared, and possibly even borne the brunt of that sacrifice over the past few years. In 2011, our public schools faced historic cuts in aids and revenue limit authority. In 2013, revenue limits were frozen; consequently the additional general school aid simply drove down the property tax levy. In order to increase school spending, the Legislature created an entirely new per pupil aid that hasn't been sustained in the current budget proposal. It is unrealistic to expect schools to continue to provide the same quality of service with the same or less funding while costs continue to rise.

I want to acknowledge the work this committee did in 2013 in making changes to the Governor's budget to address the needs of public education. I hope you will again consider the real impact your actions have on our kids across this state.

And this brings us to today. We have to prioritize our 870,000 public school students if we want to offer a quality education to the next generation.

Again, I ask you to change this budget proposal.

- There is no per pupil revenue limit increase in this budget.
- There is no increase in general school aids in the first year.

In fact, there is a cut to schools in the first year with the elimination of the per pupil categorical aid.

This is an unsustainable path. We can't eliminate achievement gaps, turn around struggling schools, increase technical course offerings, or address the increasing need to support our students without additional aids and spending authority.

Many schools are having a hard time maintaining basic programming. I've seen this in the schools I've visited, and I see this in the increasing number of school districts going to referendum to address basic needs. I'm sure you have also heard this from your own constituents.

The need for increased support is playing out across Wisconsin. Given these fiscal challenges, school districts have asked their local taxpayers for additional support through 230 referenda questions just since 2010. Support for schools has been strong and a remarkable 63 percent of referenda questions have passed. This alarming trend continues: 56 school districts are going to referenda on 73 questions just next month. For instance:

- Viroqua is looking to renew the 2010 referendum that supports educational programming and district facilities.
- Washington Island needs new carpeting, windows, and operating funds.
- Saint Croix Falls is asking voters to provide computers for middle and high students.

It is great to see local communities support their schools; however, this reliance on referenda creates a system of haves and have nots that undermines our constitutional commitment to the children of Wisconsin.

At the same time, our student population continues to evolve in ways that are not reflected in the Governor's budget proposal.

There are almost 50,000 students who are English Learners in Wisconsin, but state-required programs only serve half of them. Even worse, the state reimburses less than 8 cents on the dollar to help these students master English and succeed in the classroom. I have repeatedly called for more funding in this area, but the appropriation remains frozen while the reimbursement rate continues to drop.

Additionally, over 40 percent of Wisconsin's students are now low-income. Our outdated school funding formula does not acknowledge income and misses the mark for these students.

Unfortunately, our school districts continue to shoulder the majority of special education costs. There is no additional special education funding in this budget. Special education categorical aid was reimbursed at just 27 cents on the dollar in 2013-14. This reluctance to support EL and SWD funding, as well as recognize poverty, also undermines our constitutional commitment to our kids.

We must do more to serve all our students and ensure the next generation is prepared to contribute to our great state. It's hard to hold schools to account when this budget doesn't provide them with the resources to get the job done.

I support school accountability, but oppose the path laid out in this budget. Central to accountability is transparency and public trust. There are a lot of moving parts to this discussion, so I want to take this opportunity to lay out my principles.

- *All students who receive public funding must take the same assessment.* Simply put: we need an apples-to-apples comparison so we understand what is working for our students.
- *Assessments must be administered annually* so individual student growth and progress on eliminating achievement gaps can be highlighted and monitored.
- *Assessments should be seen as shining a light on student achievement and support student learning.* They should not be used as a hammer to undercut improvement efforts that are already underway or to threaten schools and districts that need support.
- *Grades should be avoided.* Anyone whose child brought home a report card knows that a C does not equate to "meeting expectations." The analogy from student grading to the school report cards just doesn't work.

As this budget moves forward, I hope you will make changes to what has been proposed in the interests of Wisconsin's future. I know this is a difficult budget with difficult choices, but I am asking you to make the 870,000 students who are working in classrooms around Wisconsin right now a priority. A sound public education is the foundation of our economic engine. The budget, as proposed, continues the recent legacy of less for my grandchildren, your children and grandchildren, and the next generation of our great state. Changes must be made.

I offer the technical expertise of the department as you move forward, and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to engage on these important issues. At this time I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

