SCHOOL DISTRICT OF GOODMAN - ARMSTRONG CREEK

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Dear Editor,

Students enrolled in Forest County schools will continue to see an erosion of educational opportunities if the governor's proposed biennium budget moves forward. This comes after Wisconsin public schools faced historical reductions in the last biennial budget, reducing school revenues to levels comparable to the 2007-2008 school year. We are all are being asked to do more with less during difficult times, but when an antiquated school funding formula (created in 1993), an 8% reduction in revenues from the last biennium budget and only a 1% increase in revenue for the next two years is taken into consideration, the end result will be catastrophic to public education. This will be especially true for rural schools, like those serving students in Forest County. We receive minimal general state aid and nominal categorical aids for sparsity and high cost transportation, even though the aforementioned matters are evident in our schools.

The current funding formula solely calculates a district's ability to generate revenue on local property values, which in the case of Forest County schools is well above the state average. There is no consideration given to the fact that Forest County has a significantly higher poverty rate than nearly all counties in the state. As often said, we are "property rich," therefore the vast majority of our school revenues are from the local tax base. In addition, the return of your state income tax dollars paid to Wisconsin to create general state aids that fund public schools is minimal at best. As a matter of fact, a small percentage of your tax dollars already go to Milwaukee Public Schools (this is an actual line item in the formula used to calculate a district's state aid).

In addition, the governor's recent budget proposal includes a measure that will significantly increase funding for school choice through private vouchers, while proposing only a 1% increase for public schools. The proposed increases to private vouchers will be 9.4% for K-8 students, and a staggering 21.9% for high school age students. To put this into perspective, the last biennium budget ***reduced*** public school per pupil spending by $550 per student, amounts which will remain frozen for the next two years under the governor's proposal. The proposed ***increase*** in per pupil voucher funding is $608 per elementary pupil, and $1,414 per high school pupil (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, February 18, 2013). Under this proposal, your state income tax dollars paid will be diverted from public education to private vouchers for students to attend schools that are not held to the same measures of accountability as ***all*** Wisconsin public schools.

Your state income tax dollars are being returned in minimal amounts to Forest County schools because of a broken school funding formula. State Superintendent Dr. Tony Evers, and the Department of Public Instruction, have recommended a new funding formula, *Fair Funding for Our Future*, which is a step in

the right direction to adequately and more equitably fund all public schools. It's not based solely on property valuation and does not ask for an increase in local tax dollars, but a more equitable distribution of general state aid dollars to those districts that receive minimal amounts.

If the Governor's budget moves forward with the included private voucher proposal increase, Forest County schools may see less state aid than they already receive, as any increase in a district's equalized value will only diminish state aid received, forcing schools to make up the difference by an increase to property taxes. This is not the choice of local school boards, but it is how the current funding formula works in figuring our local districts' revenue. This could be alleviated if your income tax dollars were distributed back to public schools in a more equitable way, instead of being used to expand a voucher system that has no accountability to the state in academic performance and that primarily benefits only southern, urban schools. The money used to increase and subsidize private vouchers comes directly from the pool of money that could be distributed to local schools in general and categorical aids. There is an option to increase school funding and to lower local property taxes...by putting more dollars into public school aids and less into the expansion of private school vouchers.

Governor Walker stated in his budget address, "In the end, our goal is simple...ensure that every child, regardless of where they are from or what their family income is, has access to a great education." I question the validity of this statement, as the governor's proposal will adversely affect the schools that serve Forest County students, and numerous other districts in rural Wisconsin. Dr. Tony Ever's *Fair Funding for Our Future* plan looks to find a better balance for rural schools, like ours, that have high property valuation with below average family incomes.

Your support of the schools serving the students of Forest County is appreciated. Please contact Governor Walker and your area legislators, Senator Tom Tiffany and Representative Jeff Mursau, to show your support for *Fair Funding for Our Future* to ensure that Forest County students will continue to have access to a great education.

Sincerely,

Ben Niehaus, Superintendent
Goodman-Armstrong Creek School District