

Press Conference Remarks on School Finance Framework

Fair Funding for Our Future

June 24, 2010 — Lussier Community Education Center, Madison

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Paul (Terranova), for that introduction and for your leadership here at the Lussier Community Education Center. You have built an educational and community center for children and families that is a shining example of nonprofit organization partnership with schools, social services, businesses, and local government.

I also thank all of our education leaders and partners who have joined us today. Again, thank you Paul and everyone here at Lussier who serve Madison's Westside.

Less than a year ago in a Milwaukee public school, I took the oath of office as state superintendent of public instruction of the great state of Wisconsin. On that day, I stated my unwavering commitment to public education and to make sure our goal is met of having every child a graduate prepared for career and for college.

Since that morning last July, I have worked with all the people behind me and thousands of others across Wisconsin to deliver:

- new rigorous state academic standards in English language arts and mathematics,
- a phase-out of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts examinations and replacing that with a new, modern, responsive student assessment system
- a new statewide longitudinal data system that improves accountability for student achievement from kindergarten through college—a truly PreK-20 system,
- innovation that makes sense in many areas, including charter schools, technology, service-learning, and teacher licensing flexibility,
- new strategies to improve student achievement in struggling schools, especially our largest school district, Milwaukee Public Schools,
- passage of the biggest education reform legislation in the past 25 years.

In these and other areas, I have worked with parents, students, educators, and leaders across the state to transform our education system so that every child is truly a graduate.

When I ran for office as our state's chief advocate for our students, I called for a fair, sustainable, and transparent school finance system. If you listen, as I have, to people across the state of Wisconsin -- to parents, students, and educators in our rural districts, people in our cities or our suburbs -- you will learn that our school finance system is broken. You can read it in the papers, watch the news, or listen to the radio. Public education in Wisconsin is in jeopardy, with cuts and school closings resulting in fewer educational opportunities for students across our state.

Our school funding system is broken and we must create one that is fair, sustainable, and transparent, and that supports kids every single year. We need a bipartisan commitment to make a fair and sustainable school funding system that provides predictable investments in our children's education, even in the most difficult economic times, and in ways that are understandable to everyone.

What I am proposing is a practical framework that addresses the school funding system without raising statewide net property taxes or a massive increase in state spending. My "Fair Funding for Our Future" proposal makes transparent to the citizens of Wisconsin what funding comes to schools and what funding does not.

By incorporating ideas from Republicans, Democrats, education experts, and finance specialists, I am presenting a new framework that provides a minimum amount of state aid for every student, no matter where they live in Wisconsin. It is critical. Right now there are over 20 school districts that receive no general school aid, yet several of these school districts have free and reduced school lunch rates exceeding 40 percent—exceeding the statewide average. We need to shift our system from one that only recognizes property wealth as a measure of wealth to one that takes into account how much people earn in those districts. And, student poverty and free and reduced lunch rates is one way to do that. To further address this issue, we must provide additional weighting in a portion of the general school aid formula for children who come from families receiving free and reduced school lunches.

We need to continue our good support for rural schools by fully funding sparsity aid and further helping transport rural students to school every day.

This is also a framework which will provide predictable growth in state support for schools. And, we need to re-examine all our categorical aid programs and to configure them so that we're investing in innovation and programs that show results. And finally, this fair funding framework ensures state education dollars are spent educating children without a new property tax increase. By allocating the nearly \$900 million dollar School Levy Tax Credit, which does not pay for one single child to be educated, into general school aids, we hold net property taxes statewide steady while ensuring funds go to educate kids. No one at the national level or education experts and think-tanks, now or in the future, would consider the school levy tax credit as state support and aid for education. As I said, it does not educate a single child.

We need to stop this dramatically increasing bipartisan game, which has grown by more than 400 percent since it started 20 years ago – a rate of increase far higher than actual school aids.

This framework reorganizes the existing dollars to better serve our students. And this framework protects property taxpayers, with no net change in property taxes statewide, and makes sure no school district faces a drastic reduction in state school aid in any given year.

I also intend, as I mentioned before, to consolidate and focus categorical aids in ways that encourage innovation and focus on increasing student achievement, turning around struggling schools, and increasing our graduation outcomes. I plan to work with leaders and others to create new innovative ideas that will be part of my biennial budget.

Today, against the recommendations of many, I am jumping into the school finance reform debate. Change is needed and now is the right time to provide a new framework. I intend to continue pressing my “Fair Funding for Our Future” framework in discussions with candidates and leaders, in my biennial budget proposal, and through next year’s elections and budget debates. I offer a public invitation to all candidates and parties to sit down with me and talk school finance and my framework.

My “Fair Funding for Our Future” framework is responsible and it can meet our kids’ needs during difficult times. Investing to ensure every child is a graduate has to be a state priority. We need to reform our state school finance system to make it fair, sustainable, and transparent. With these reforms, the citizens of Wisconsin will know what state aid goes to schools for educating our kids.

A question might be, why are we doing this now, in the middle of the summer, when the budget debate is so far down the road? We need to work now to build a brighter future for our kids and their already financially strapped schools. We also have to make sure that every candidate for state office, no matter what their party, addresses school funding in real and substantial terms during the fall campaigns.

If you look at the state of Wisconsin, whether it’s Wauzeka or Wausau, Valders, Verona, Mellen, or Milwaukee, we must strive to do better for our public schools. We can feel pride in our public schools and their students’ accomplishments; we lead the nation in graduation rates. However, everyday, our students face the results of budget cuts, increased class sizes, and fewer educational opportunities, precisely at the time when they face increased competition from their peers in other states and, frankly, across the world. It is neither sustainable nor acceptable, the funding system we have now. We must bring meaningful change to fairly fund our children’s futures, we must deliver on hope, especially during a difficult time, through the power of public education.

I am ready to work with the citizens of Wisconsin and our elected leaders to fix what doesn't work and to build upon what does. In this effort to be the best, it will take all of us to make sure that every child is a graduate. "Fair Funding for Our Future" is a framework that will help us achieve that goal.

I thank you for being here today and God bless our kids, and their parents, and the teachers and people that work in our schools.

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Tony Evers is Wisconsin's state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>.