Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance

Wisconsin’s PK-12 Pathway to World-Class Student Success

Executive Summary

The Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance is an alliance of:

- The Association of Wisconsin School Administrators
- The Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators
- The Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials
- The Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services
- The Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators - Affiliate
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is hard to think of a bigger state priority than ensuring that every Wisconsin student graduates from high school prepared for college and career success. This is particularly crucial because education is among the most important determinants of success and prosperity in life, from health and lifetime earning potential to meaningful participation in civic life. Now, perhaps more than ever, the quality of education that we provide our children determines not only their individual futures, but also the collective social and economic well-being of the entire state. To realize our vision of preparing all students to be college and career-ready, it is imperative that we continue to raise the academic bar for all students and close gaps for lower-performing groups.

Wisconsin’s educators can and will meet this imperative, but only if the state’s policymakers commit to evidence-based policies that are proven to drive whole-system improvement at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. Committing to evidence and prioritizing the goal that Wisconsin schools graduate every student college and career-ready is the right way forward for our students, as well as for our civic and economic growth. If prioritizing education and evidence-based policy is the right path, the wrong path is to see education primarily as a cost to be minimized, and to base state policy more on ideology or emotion than evidence.

There is real cause for concern that policy-making, at the state level, is moving down the wrong path. In national rankings of PK-12 per-pupil spending, for example, Wisconsin has plummeted from the 12th-highest state in 2003-04 to the 21st in 2011-12. While evidence continues to increasingly support the importance of investment in early childhood development, educator preparation, and educational innovation, these issues are often overlooked in the Legislature in favor of less research-based and more ideology-driven reforms such as expanding vouchers or politicizing academic content standards.

The following policy recommendations were created through careful consideration of our state’s past educational successes, as well as lessons learned from world leaders in student learning. National and international exemplars such as Massachusetts, Ontario, and Finland have demonstrated high levels of academic achievement; in each case, policymakers have:

» Invested in highly-trained and motivated teachers.
» Designed accountability systems focused on effective intervention at the school and student levels.
» Provided adequate and equitable funding.
» Ensured that all students are ready to learn by addressing early childhood development, health care, and poverty.

The policy recommendations that follow provide a policy pathway for ensuring that our system of public education is the best in the world. Wisconsin students and citizens deserve no less.

The SAA policy recommendations are organized around six key areas: Students Ready to Learn, Supporting Excellence in Teaching, Innovation, Finance, Climate and Culture, and, Standards, Assessment and Accountability.

There is a place in America to take a stand: it is public education. It is the underpinning of our cultural and political system. It is the great common ground. Public education after all is the engine that moves us as a society toward a common destiny...It is in public education that the American dream begins to take shape.

- Tom Brokaw
I. Students Ready to Learn

A. Early Childhood
Research has long demonstrated that adults who had access to quality preschool education have higher earnings and are more likely to hold a job, commit fewer crimes, and graduate from high school than those who did not have access to preschool education. Although Wisconsin has taken steps to improve early childhood education with the expansion of four-year-old kindergarten and YoungStar, a program to improve childcare provider quality, the state has yet to realize a comprehensive preschool policy. Moreover, the high cost of preschool, a lack of quality providers, and cuts in funding are thwarting early learning opportunities.

With this in mind, the SAA calls on the legislature to adopt a comprehensive preschool policy that:

- Commits to the goal of providing universal access to four-year-old kindergarten.
- Expands rewards for quality care measures, including reversing the large cuts in funding for the Wisconsin Shares program, promoting childcare centers’ accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and exploring the development model of early childhood provider assessment and support.
- Promotes coordination of state agencies, such as the state’s Department of Health Services and Department of Public Instruction (DHS, DPI), as well as coordination between public schools and childcare providers, to link them with early childhood programs.
- Provides that these state agencies should publish an annual report detailing Wisconsin’s goal of providing the opportunity for every Wisconsin child to participate in a high-quality preschool program and share exemplary models of coordination at the local level.

II. Children's Mental Health
In Wisconsin, too many children have unmet mental health needs, which can adversely affect these children and their families as well as our communities and schools. The fact is that children’s mental health needs are often unmet because of systemic shortcomings in how such services are provided.

The State of Minnesota has begun to successfully address children’s mental health needs through a grant program supporting school-linked mental health services. This grant program has leveraged federal, state and local efforts to dramatically improve services to children.

The Minnesota initiative has found success by connecting or co-locating mental health services providers with schools and has proven particularly effective in reaching children who have never accessed mental health services. Not surprisingly, school districts in Minnesota are documenting improved behavioral and academic progress for students whose mental health needs are being met. The Minneapolis school district, for example, has documented a decrease in suspensions and increased attendance and academic achievement, something that is attributed to the program.²

For these reasons, the SAA calls on the legislature to:

- Create a school-linked mental health grant program, modeled after a successful initiative launched in Minnesota. The initiative would offer five-year grants for funding start-up costs for providing services to children who are uninsured. Grants would also be used for coordination between school, county and mental health providers.
II. Excellence in Teaching and Learning

A. Educator Preparation
One of the most important variables in students’ academic success is the knowledge and skill of the classroom teacher and it is critically important that we seek to continue raising the bar for what our teachers know and are able to do.

To ensure that the best and brightest Wisconsinites take up teaching as a profession, the SAA calls on the state superintendent to convene a commission to:

» Create a statewide initiative to identify and recruit talented candidates into teacher and administrator preparation programs, with an emphasis on diversity.
» Conduct a review of teacher and educational leader preparation programs and make recommendations on how best to prepare and support educators (i.e., through formal residencies as done in Finland and other high-achieving countries).
» Ensure that training programs prepare educators for the Common Core State Standards and Educator Effectiveness process.

B. Educator Effectiveness
After three years of development and pilot testing, Wisconsin is implementing a new Educator Effectiveness System for teachers and school administrators this school year. The system was developed on the basis of recommendations from a design team convened by the state superintendent, with working teams articulating specific teacher and leader evaluation measures and processes.

Based on these efforts, the SAA calls on the legislature to:

» Continue funding Educator Effectiveness implementation, particularly for an external evaluation to assess validity and reliability and school district capacity to maintain these systems over time and for ongoing training and support.

In addition, the Department of Public Instruction should:

» Continue to engage school districts to explore alternative approaches to teacher evaluation that address capacity issues while maintaining overall system quality and fidelity.
» Continue to monitor emerging research and policy implications from other states around teacher and school leader evaluations, including “early adopter” states, such as those receiving federal Race to the Top funding.

C. Instructional Technology
Information technology provides tools to enhance educational opportunities. But acquiring technology is not sufficient to harness technology to improve learning. Both training and access to infrastructure is necessary to utilize the promise of technological advances. A broad group of individuals and organizations have come together to advance the second generation of Wisconsin’s Technology for Educational Achievement (TEACH) program. TEACH was launched in the 1990s to allow schools and libraries to take advantage of technology to improve learning. The TEACH 2.0 consortium has developed recommendations in four key areas: broadband, hardware and infrastructure, access to digital learning, and staff development.
The SAA calls on the legislature to:

» Implement the TEACH 2.0 recommendations to address school district needs related to broadband, digital learning content, and high-quality professional development to realize the potential of technology in improving student learning.

III. Innovation

Increasing educational effectiveness and innovation requires identifying promising approaches, testing those approaches rigorously, and disseminating the results. Toward this end, Wisconsin must develop a PK-12 educational innovation strategy that provides incentives for districts to pilot innovative practices that evidence suggests will improve student learning, and include rigorous performance evaluation that provides guidelines for practitioners and policy-makers to continuously improve teaching and learning.

The SAA believes that there are three specific areas in which innovation should be encouraged and monitored: personalized teaching and learning, potential modifications to the traditional school calendar, and rigorous research on charter schools to identify and disseminate innovative practices shown to improve student learning.

Personalized Learning

Personalizing the educational experience for students provides considerable leverage to build capacity for drastic improvements in the performance of the educational system. In Wisconsin, the Institute at CESA#1 has been working with a group of school districts since 2010 on a personalized learning initiative. The Institute has developed a model, grounded in research, for personalized learning that focuses on learning and teaching in such a way that the student is the central figure. The change strategy involved in the model begins with changes to learning and teaching strategies that allow students to achieve success while moving along a learning continuum with the end goal of becoming independent, life-long learners.

School Calendar

The SAA also recommends that Wisconsin look anew at the traditional school calendar, both in terms of the amount of instructional time provided to students as well as how the instructional time is “packaged.” American public schools provide, on average, 180 days of instruction to students; by one standard of comparison, the international average is around 200 to 220 days. In a historical sense, the U.S. public school calendar was set up to accommodate students living in agrarian settings. Despite dramatic changes in the labor force and economy, the traditional school calendar has proven remarkably “durable”.

The state should be promoting instructionally focused innovations that address summer learning loss, extended learning opportunities to close achievement gaps and more effective opportunities for staff development.

Charter Schools

In the 1990s, states began adopting legislation allowing for the formation of charter schools, which are public schools that are exempt from many state education regulations in order to promote innovation. However, states have not adopted corresponding research to determine what practices employed by charters are effective or ineffective to inform educators and policy-makers.
The SAA believes that the state of Wisconsin should create a PK-12 educational innovation strategy, overseen by the Department of Public Instruction, with input from an advisory panel, that includes representatives from PK-12 educators, higher education organizations, parental organizations, student leadership organizations, and business leaders. The innovation strategy should provide for five-year grants for school districts to pilot promising innovations related to:

» Developing and modeling personalized learning that includes data rich learner profiles, customized learning paths, and, proficiency-based progress (rather than seat time).
» Developing and modeling evidence-based school calendars (e.g., calendars that address summer drop, extended-learning opportunities, and teacher professional development).

In addition, the innovation strategy should:

» Include a robust system for the evaluation of innovative practices funded by grants, as well as charter programs
» Provide for the intentional dissemination of information related to innovative practices that have been shown to improve student learning.

**IV. Finance**

School funding is among the most important investments the state makes in its future civic and economic growth. Current conditions demonstrate that Wisconsin needs to adjust its PK-12 investment strategies both to reap the benefits of all students on track for career and college success and to meet its constitutional obligations for providing schools as “nearly uniform as practicable”. For example: Wisconsin’s national ranking in K-12 per pupil spending has plummeted from 12th highest in 2003-04 to 21st in 2011-12. In addition, our system of school finance has a systemic gap between allowable spending under revenue caps and increases in school district fixed costs (staffing, transportation, utilities, etc.)

A high-quality, effective school finance system designed to foster improvements in student achievement for all Wisconsin school children must be fair and equitable for all children, be sustainable to afford all children continued access to high-quality instructional programming, recognize and address the unique and extraordinary needs of students in poverty, Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, and students with disabilities.

The SAA calls on Wisconsin legislators to:

» Increase the annual per pupil adjustment under revenue caps by the annual percentage increase in the consumer price index (CPI).
» Adopt State Superintendent Tony Evers’ Fair Funding for Our Future Plan, which includes:
  o Distributing the $897 million in school levy and first dollar credits to school districts in the equalization aid formula.
  o Distributing a minimum level of school aid for every student in every school district.
  o Increasing the secondary cost ceiling from 90% to 100% of the previous year’s average statewide shared cost.
  o Providing a significant increase in revenue limit per pupil as well as a corresponding increase in general aid.
  o Creating a provision to “hold harmless” in the short term school districts that lose resources under the plan.
Act to provide meaningful support for educating students in poverty, students with exceptional education needs, English Language learners and for transportation for students attending geographically large, sparsely populated rural school districts (full report includes specific recommendations).

Finally, in an effort to provide a greater degree of stability for Wisconsin districts, the SAA calls on the legislature to:

- Maintain a “rainy day fund” to buffer state finances during economic recessions. As PK-12 funding in Wisconsin equals about one-third of the state budget, an equal percentage of the state’s rainy day fund should be earmarked for PK-12 education funding. This “state aid stabilization” mechanism would be used during recessions to buffer school aids from drastic cuts, as was the case in 2011-13 where school funding was reduced by $792 million.

V. Climate and Culture

Every school should be a warm and welcoming place for students, parents, staff, and the community as a whole.

To promote positive school climate and culture, the SAA calls on the legislature to create an Office of Mental Health, School Safety, and Violence Prevention within the Department of Public Instruction in order to:

- Coordinate the PK-12 community’s work with the Office of Children’s Mental Health.
- Provide a clearinghouse for effective practices, policies, and training related to school climate and crisis preparedness.
- Assist, facilitate, and encourage more schools to adopt a prevention-based, evidence-based behavioral system of support and trauma-sensitive practices (e.g., Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support, PBIS).
- Provide assistance to schools who are responding to a crisis.
- Coordinate with the Department of Justice, Department of Health Services, and other state agencies to promote coherent and consistent recommendations to school districts and local law enforcement and child welfare agencies.
- Collect, analyze, and share data related to important issues affecting school climate.

VII. Standards, Assessment and Accountability

A. Standards

Over the past twenty years, Wisconsin has developed and adopted academic content standards in over twenty-five different content areas as a guide for school districts to use in planning and adopting a curriculum that is aligned with clear, concise, and rigorous expectations as to what students are expected to know and be able to do at regular intervals during their PK-12 education. While the Department of Public Instruction adopts model standards, school districts have always had local control to adopt state standards, or to adapt, modify, or create new standards that meet their local needs. They also retain control over how best to design a curriculum that aligns with state-approved content standards.

B. Assessment

While standards outline what a student should know and be able to do, assessments help to ensure that progress is being made. Assessing student learning, which provides an understanding as to what students
know and can do in relation to established content standards, serves an important purpose in education. It can provide feedback to the learner, diagnostic information for the educator, and actionable information for parents, schools, and future employers and institutions of higher education.

Assessment must be incorporated in a manner that supports the larger school mission and assessment practices need to be balanced, evidence-based, and properly aligned with the fundamental purposes of teaching and learning. The development of school and educator capacity must be integral and not an afterthought.

C. Accountability
Accountability systems in high-performing entities, including frameworks for both content standards and assessments, vary widely. However, these systems share a common thread: the need for effective intervention and support to address areas of need and growth at both the school level (how do we identify and improve the lowest-performing schools) and at the student level (how do we identify and improve the lowest-performing students). Although the means of identifying where development is needed vary between the systems, each tries to provide useful support rather than punishment or blame; for example, an OECD report from 2010 describes Ontario’s system as one that assumes “that teachers are professionals who are trying to do the right thing, and that performance problems are much more likely to be a product of lack of knowledge than lack of motivation.”

The SAA calls on the legislature to:

» **Establish a State Academic Standards and Assessment Review Council** that would be charged with reviewing the adoption and adaptation of the state’s academic standards and assessments, as well as provide input on effective state interventions aimed at improving low-performing schools.

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2. Mark Sander, Senior Clinical Psychologist, Hennepin County/Minneapolis Public Schools, WI Community Briefing, April 2, 2014.