

Stoughton Area School District

Administrative and Educational Services Center

320 North Street
Stoughton, WI 53589-1733
(608) 877-5000

June 4, 2015

Dear families,

In recent weeks, you may have heard about or read about the state budget and how it could impact public education. Last month, the legislature's Joint Finance Committee proposed a budget bill that has huge ramifications for Stoughton Area School District (SASD) as well as public school districts across Wisconsin. The bill still has to be debated by the full legislature, but we wanted to give you a summary of the proposed changes and how we believe they could impact our schools and community if enacted:

Below the national average - This budget would drive Wisconsin under the national average in per pupil spending, according to Michael Griffith, a senior policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States. For the first time in history, the state budget will not provide for an increase per student in revenue limits (spending caps). Public school budgets are frozen in 2015-16 and will receive a \$100 increase per student in a special aid in 2016-17.

Athletics and extracurriculars - Home-schooled students, private school and virtual charter school students who reside in our district but do not attend Stoughton schools nonetheless could participate in any extra-curricular or athletic team our district offers. The WIAA is a private, non-profit organization composed of both non-public schools and public schools like SASD. The WIAA has come out against this budget provision as an "alarming precedent and an unacceptable over-reach" by the state government.

Teacher licensing - The new law eliminates many standards for licensing teachers and, according to the SAA (School Administrators Alliance), "would position Wisconsin as having among the lowest entry standards for the teaching profession in the country."

New graduation requirements - A school district could not grant a student a high school diploma unless he/she passes a 100-question civics assessment. Additionally, there is a provision allowing up to ½ of a student's credits required for graduation to be obtained via a learning portfolio. There is no guidance around how this process will work.

'Apples and oranges' assessments - School districts will not all have to take the same state assessment. That means parents likely will not have the information to make an "apples to apples" comparison of school districts' academic performance data and be able to make fully informed decisions about where they send their kids to school. The budget bill also proposes a controversial five-star "rating" system for schools based on their performance on these assessments instead of the current system identifying how well schools meet expectations.

State Aid - The Stoughton Area School District, and all public schools across the state, will have their state aid cut to allow for voucher expansion under this budget bill. Vouchers use public tax dollars to pay for a student's private education, but studies have shown that voucher students perform no better than students in public schools, according to the School Administrators Alliance (SAA).

Cost of vouchers - In year one, 1% of students from SASD could receive vouchers to attend private religious or secular schools. SASD would lose aid in the amount of \$7,210 for an elementary or middle school student and \$7,856 for each high school student to pay the private school voucher. In the first year, this could cost SASD approximately \$237,000. Each year, the maximum number of students allowed to attend a voucher school increases by an additional percent (e.g.

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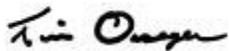
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in year two up to 2% of students) and the state aid payment that the district loses for each student will increase. After 10 years, there would be no limit on the number of vouchers offered to students in our school district.

Special education vouchers - Students receiving special education services could potentially attend a private school with a special education voucher. \$12,000 per student would be cut from SASD's state aid to fund each of these vouchers. Students enrolled in these private voucher schools would not be guaranteed the legal rights and protections afforded to them by federal law. There is no proposal to increase special education aid for public schools. The current budget proposal results in eight years without an increase in special education aid for public schools.

These are just some of the provisions in the 40-page budget bill advanced by the Joint Finance Committee. The bill must still pass through the legislature before it reaches Governor Walker, but as is, we fear the current proposal erodes local control of schools, undermines school accountability and does not adequately fund our public education system. The district and our Board of Education will be sharing these concerns with our state legislators and the Joint Finance Committee, (listed below) but we wanted to keep you informed about how this proposal directly affects Stoughton Schools.

Sincerely,



Dr. Tim Onsager
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Stoughton Area School District
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