



April 21, 2021

Testimony Regarding the WI Biennial Budget, 2021-2023

Focus: High-Cost Students

From: John Humphries, Executive Director, AEF

My name is John Humphries and I have the honor of presenting today on behalf of the Association for Equity in Funding, a group of school districts educating over 80,000 students across the state. We believe that schools should have equitable access to the financial resources necessary to educate the students we serve. Since the 2001 Wisconsin Supreme Court decision known as Vincent vs. Voight, our group has been advocating for fairness. My concern in the last hearing was the system of unfair and unequal funding for districts that has created winners and losers known as the “Low Revenue Limit.” Today I want to address the challenges of educating high-needs students without the resources necessary to do so.

AEF recognizes three critical groups that were identified by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 2001: students from low-income homes, students with disabilities, and students who are English Learners. I will discuss these students one group at a time.

Students from Low-Income Homes

Wisconsin is one of just a handful of states that does not specifically address the additional costs of educating children who come from poverty. Yes, we have AGR funding to address class sizes in grades K-3, but the needs go well beyond class size reduction. Districts need to provide additional background knowledge and content exposure, physical and mental health services, trauma responsive classrooms, meals, and more. Like it or not, when families are unable or unwilling to provide for their children, schools pick up the slack. Your own Blue Ribbon School Funding Task Force called for an additional funding allocation of 20% for students from low-income homes. **AEF supports this proposal, as well as the DPI proposal to provide an additional \$150 per student from low-income homes.**

Students with Disabilities

You have heard a lot about students with disabilities in the past few years. **Remember, districts are following strict state and federal laws about meeting their needs.** I should know, I wrote one of the most comprehensive administrative rules when I was at DPI. The rule was specifically written to be rigorous and NOT to allow overidentification. One challenge is that disabilities are not evenly distributed around the state. In some small communities, housing and caring for high-needs foster children with disabilities is a sort of “Cottage Industry,” where few other jobs are available. We also know that living in poverty can lead to disabilities, like lead poisoning in low-cost housing. Every year, millions of dollars are taken from overall funding to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Schools want to do the right

thing by educating all students, but it isn't fair to nondisabled students when the legislature creates mandates that are not adequately funded. **AEF calls for a sum-certain reimbursements of 45% of costs in year 1 and 55% of costs in year 2. The Rainy Day fund and unexpected positive tax revenues should allow you to prioritize this funding need.**

English Learners

Finally, with regard to English Learners, it's another case of a mandate without adequate funding. In some districts, there are just a handful of children learning English, and they need to meet the requirements just as if there were dozens. It's expensive, time consuming, and important work. AEF supports the DPI proposal to modify the existing Bilingual-Bicultural (BLBC) state aid program to provide support for all LEAs that serve ELs, establishing a funding floor of \$10,000 for each district serving at least one and up to one EL, and providing \$500 for each additional English Learner. Again, your own Blue Ribbon Commission recommended "weighting (EL) pupils as 1.2 FTE in the general school aids and revenue limit formulas."

In closing, please begin to recognize the differential burdens faced by districts as we meet state and federal mandates to educate children with disabilities, English learners, and we do as much as possible to raise children out of poverty. Thank you for your time and attention.