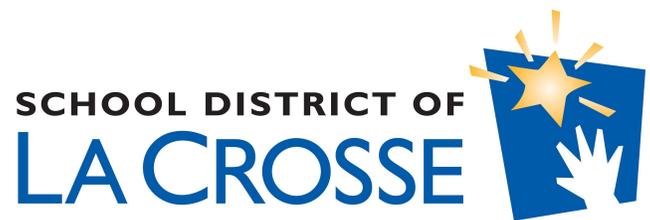


Aaron J. J. Engel, Ph. D.
Superintendent of Schools
807 East Avenue South
La Crosse, WI 54601
608.789.7628 Fax: 608.789.7604



Kelly Galván, Executive Assistant
kgalvan@lacrossesd.org

Laura Steigerwald, Executive Assistant/Board Secretary
lsteiger@lacrossesd.org

March 31, 2021

Dear State Legislators,

Education funding must be a priority for the next biennium budget. The pandemic has shown just how important schools are to our communities and our economies. Public education spending in Wisconsin has fallen to below the national average. We know that our communities prize a strong education system and we want our children to have the best possible future. Investing in public education will make this a reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the inequities in our school systems. Students who face barriers to learning have struggled even more over the last year. We need to provide each of our students what they need to succeed and become productive members of our community. We need to invest in schools to address the ongoing challenges students face and the particular challenges of this last year.

While Federal assistance to schools for COVID-related expenses has helped, we continue to face budget shortfalls. This year we incurred new expenses that exceeded the Federal funding we were provided: to buy electronic devices so students could learn at home, to purchase hot spots so students have internet access, to provide PPE for students and staff, to purchase software so students could learn remotely, and for improvements to HVAC systems. Federal funding is one-time money for one-time expenses and it is not enough. We need Wisconsin to invest in public education so that we can educate students next year and into the future.

Highlighted below are a few of the items that are most crucial for maintaining and improving the quality of education for our students: special education funding, increasing general revenues, declining enrollment mitigation, school mental health categorical aid, and affordable, reliable, high-speed internet.

Special Education Funding

Schools must receive a significant increase in special education reimbursement. This reimbursement is for legally required services to our most vulnerable students. Increasing reimbursement ensures students with disabilities get the services they deserve and it benefits all students through increased availability of general fund dollars.

Last school year the State covered just 28.21% of expenses incurred for students with disabilities. To cover the difference, the School District of La Crosse transferred just over \$10 million from the general fund for special education expenses. The Governor's proposal to increase reimbursement to 50% would cover an additional \$3.7 million of special education services and make more funds available to all students. Increase special education reimbursement to 50% of costs to provide the education each student deserves.

Increase General Revenues

Schools must receive an inflationary increase to general school funding. As the cost of materials and services increase due to inflation so must the aid to schools, or schools end up with fewer resources to educate students. An inflationary increase to revenue limits of \$200 per FTE is crucial or we will not be able to provide the same high quality education for our students next year.

Declining Enrollment Mitigation

Schools must be given relief for the one-year loss of students due to COVID. Allow schools to use the greater of the 2019-20 or 2020-21 pupil count for revenue limit calculations to mitigate the one-time impact of COVID on enrollment. The School District of La Crosse experienced a 68% drop in summer school enrollment due to COVID. Despite anticipating an increase of eight students for the 2020-21 school year, instead we lost 107 students, mostly 4K and Kindergarten students who are already enrolling for next year. As a result, we experienced a loss of 166 FTEs in our aid formula. This occurred despite establishing a 4k-12 virtual school for any family who wanted online education and providing in-person education continually for those that could not receive appropriate services at home. Additional necessary adjustments include increasing the special adjustment aid to 90% of the prior year and treating the non-recurring declining enrollment exemption and base revenue hold harmless as recurring adjustments for one year only.

If nothing is done, the School District of La Crosse will lose \$1,187,403 in revenue limit authority next year as a result of the temporary one-year loss of students due to COVID. This will negatively impact our students' education for two more years and despite educating a larger number of students next year, we will have less money to do so. We want students to receive the education they deserve. It is crucial that the funding formula is adjusted to mitigate the one-year loss of students due to COVID.

School Mental Health Categorical Aid

We have seen a significant increase in mental health needs for our students over the last decade. The pandemic has exacerbated student mental health needs. We want to increase social workers, school counselors, school psychologists and nurses to help students get the assistance they need. Unfortunately, we do not have the funds to do so as these are new commitments our public expects of us after revenue limits were set. A categorical aid for school mental health resources will provide the supports our students need to come to school ready to learn.

Affordable, Reliable, High-speed Internet

This pandemic has shown that all students and families need access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet. It was essential for families navigating online education and even when in-person, the internet is necessary to complete homework and engage in enrichment activities. The internet also became an even more necessary part of our economy as parents worked from home and businesses shifted to online services. Investing in affordable, reliable, high-speed internet will close the "homework gap" and advance our rural and urban economies.

More than ever, we have seen the crucial asset that public education is to our community and our economy. More than ever, we have seen the inequities of underfunding public education. More than ever, we need to invest in our children, in our public education system, and in our future. Thank you for your service to the State and standing up for our children.

Sincerely,



Aaron J. J. Engel, Ph.D.
Superintendent