



# School District of Onalaska

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April 27, 2021

Senator Brad Pfaff  
Representative Steve Doyle  
Members of the Joint Finance Committee

Dear Senator Pfaff, Representative Doyle, and Members of the Joint Finance Committee:

Thank you for your hard work and service to your constituents and all the citizens of Wisconsin through your role as elected officials. We understand the importance of your work and the challenge you will have in weighing state budget priorities and the unique challenges you are facing developing the upcoming state budget for the new biennium.

We know a significant portion of state budget resources are combined with local property taxes to support Pre-K 12 education. As you begin the state budget process, we want to share with you our district's planning in meeting the needs of students and families in the coming years. Certainly the pandemic has posed significant challenges in our efforts to meet our students' educational needs. Initially we made the abrupt switch to virtual instruction for the final quarter of the 2019-20 school year and summer school.

We also want to explain how we've navigated the past year and highlight three education budget recommendations we strongly support and provide background why these recommendations are important for the students in our district. We strongly support:

- maintaining at least a \$200 increase in the revenue limit with corresponding increases in state aid;
- allowing districts to use the higher of the 2020 or 2019 September and Summer School counts for calculation of revenue limits;
- increases to state Special Education Categorical Aid to reduce impact on other district general fund resources.

During the 2020-21 school year we regularly received guidance from multiple public health entities, listened to our community, communicated with our families, and closely monitored the academic progress of our students. As a result, our services continually evolved as we strived to do what was best for our students.

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Prior to the 2020-21 school year, we developed and implemented a plan to serve families based on their choice between a continuous virtual option or an option to attend in-person instruction when permitted by the District Reopening Plan.

The District invested well over \$600,000 in district funds plus \$200,000 in the initial ESSER funds as we began the 2020-21 school year for technology, safety improvements and supplies, and meeting the needs of our families. These investments included:

- Chromebooks and hotspots to ensure every child who needed a device and Internet access had these resources;
- District funded childcare with district paraprofessional staff to provide support for families and to support virtual learning;
- HVAC system changes and upgrades, cleaning supplies, face masks, and hand sanitizer.

This past year we progressed from providing childcare and virtual instruction support and serving the most vulnerable students in the fall, to returning elementary students full time with secondary students in hybrid, to returning all students to in-person five-day instruction while maintaining the choice for families to select a continuous virtual learning option.

As we prepare the 2021-22 school year and beyond, we are prioritizing supporting students in every way possible through our Accelerated Learning Plan that has been created to attempt to restore any learning lag from the challenges of this past year. Our district intends to fully utilize the second and third rounds of ESSER funding for our Accelerated Learning Plan. The district is strongly committed to utilizing ESSER funds for this initiative. The District intends to utilize ESSER II and III funds to annually support the following for three years in our Accelerated Learning Plan:

*Three tutors per each district school, increased mental health professional contracted time for students, after-school programming, tutors for after-school programming, community health worker, program coordination for increased tutoring/increased after-school programming/increased summer school offerings, and support to offer multi-grade offerings for families choosing virtual instruction, equity coordination, and behavioral specialist support.*

Therefore, ESSER funds cannot be a replacement for the normal local and state support of schools. **It is imperative that normal increases in the revenue limit of at least \$200 per student for both years be continued to maintain existing school in-person programming with corresponding increases in state aid to stabilize local property taxes.**

Like other school districts, the School District of Onalaska's September and Summer School counts were lower this year. By far the biggest reductions were seen in our PreK programs and Summer School Programs as many parents chose to delay the start of their four-year olds' school experience due to the pandemic or not to participate in summer school. We expect to see enrollment for 2021-22 to be more aligned to our historical

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enrollments. However, the financial negative \$700,000 impact of this one-year enrollment dip is substantial for our district. **We support a proposal to allow districts to utilize the higher of the 2020 or 2019 enrollments be utilized in the revenue limit calculation.**

Finally, the need to continually transfer from our general fund to the special education fund continues to grow. This is primarily due to stagnant special education categorical aid. This issue needs to be resolved as it adversely impacts the general fund for the majority of school programming. Our preliminary 2021-22 budget includes a \$4.8 million transfer from our \$39 million general fund. From 2010-11 to 2021-22 the average annual percentage increase in this transfer out from our general fund has been 8.1%. The amount of the transfer was only \$2.56 million in 2010-11 compared to the \$4.79 million budgeted transfer for 2021-22. These increases far outpaced revenue limit increases and per pupil aid increases, thereby reducing resources available for other instruction. **We support increasing special education categorical aid reimbursement to avoid reducing education funds available in the General Fund.**

The unique nature of the past year has not negated the need for resources to best serve our students. In fact, it has highlighted the need for continued support to maintain the high-quality existing programs along with the need to provide supplemental funding to support accelerated learning.

We appreciate your consideration of these factors as you prioritize funding in the upcoming budget.

Sincerely,



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