

Dear Senator Bernier:

I am writing today to express my interest in the importance of financing for education in the next biennial budget. The 2020-21 school year has really brought to light, with the pandemic, the importance of schools in our communities. Although Wisconsin's funding of public education has fallen below the national average, in Stratford we learned that our community takes great pride in our school district and wants what is best for the future of our children. Investing in public education will make this a reality!

The Federal funding for schools for Covid related expenses has helped, in part to offset costs, however we continue to see budget shortfalls. In Stratford the 2020-21 school year started on time and we had students in school every day (high school students were four days per week) the federal money helps to offset the new expenses that have occurred this year which include but are not limited to: a new air ionization system for both of our buildings, individualized seating arrangements, increased PPE purchases for students and staff, increased number of bus routes, increased work hours for our custodial staff, the purchase of hot spots for students that needed to learn remotely and had no internet availability at home. The federal assistance was in large part spent before we even received the money. Please also remember that the federal funds are one time money for one time expenses - we must continue to invest in public education so future students are afforded the same quality of education as we have had in previous years.

Here are some of the areas that I believe are essential for maintaining and improving the quality of education for our students:

Special Education Funding: Stratford, along with all other districts continues to see an increase in the number of students in our special education population as well as the increased level of service needed for our most vulnerable students. Increasing the special education reimbursement rate to 50% of aid eligible costs by the end of the biennium will help Stratford, and all districts provide this legally required education to our students.

Declining Enrollment: I would also like to express our strong support for comprehensive pupil count mitigation including: 1) Allowing districts to use the greater of the 2019-20 or 2020-21 pupil count for revenue limit calculations; 2) Increasing special adjustment aid from 85 percent to 90 percent of prior year general aid in each year of the biennium; and 3) Treating the non-recurring declining enrollment exemption and base revenue hold harmless as recurring adjustments for one year only. Be sure to explain your district's projected fiscal impact of the pupil count decline and what that could mean for educational opportunities for the kids you serve.

High Cost Transportation Aid: If the state budget motion made by Representative Mursau and Senator Felzkowski to revise the high cost transportation program were approved, that would also have a significant impact on Stratford and all other rural schools and as such is supported by our District. Being a rural school district our transportation costs are much higher than the more densely populated areas of the state.

In addition to these three key items our school district also supports the general revenue increase (although little impact in Stratford because of our declining enrollment), school mental health categorical aid and the need to expand affordable, reliable high speed internet.

Finally, we know that public education is an asset for our community as well as our economy. I hope you agree that investing our children and the public education system is an investment in our State's future! Thanks for your time and your service to our state!

Sincerely,

Scott Winch, Superintendent
School District of Stratford