



# SCHOOL DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN DELLS

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May 25, 2021

Senator Joan Ballweg  
Room 409 South  
State Capital  
PO Box 7882  
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Ballweg:

It is an honor for me to represent the School District of Wisconsin Dells (SDWD) and present you with this letter to advocate on behalf of the 1,700-plus students our district serves on a daily basis. Certainly, due to the worldwide pandemic, the past 15 months have provided unprecedented times, and I thank you for your leadership role in state government during this time.

### **Pandemic Background Information**

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided unprecedented challenges to our education system for the past 15 months. The SDWD has risen to meet the challenges of serving our aforementioned students during this time. In the spring of 2020, through innovative best practices, our district faithfully served our students and kept learning moving forward. Unlike some of our other public and private school peers, we persevered and did not “quit” or “throw in the towel” early. On almost every occasion, our teachers and principals went well above the daily expectations. We did this because our district vision statement calls for academic and individual excellence for a stronger community. Additionally, one of our strategic objectives of the district is to graduate students ready for post-high school success. The typical culminating event & tradition of commencement for the Class of 2020 did not take place until August 4, 2020. This in-person outdoor ceremony provided immeasurable closure for the students, staff and their families. Our final graduate of the Class of 2020 received his diploma, due to COVID-19 concerns, in a private graduation ceremony on August 14, 2020.

The summer of 2020 was far from normal and required an incredible amount of planning for the 2020-21 school year. Additionally, our custodial and maintenance staff saw an increased workload to install a great deal of personal protective equipment (PPE) to allow us to keep our schools clean, healthy and safe as possible. As such, the district also encountered many increased and new expenditures for technology and the aforementioned PPE.

### **School District of Wisconsin Dells Provides Face-to-Face & Virtual Instruction**

The SDWD began the 2020-21 school year serving students by providing an in-person option as well as a virtual option. In round numbers, 85% of our students were served in an in-person learning environment, and the remaining 15% were served with virtual instruction featuring live and recorded instruction. As the year has progressed, the number of students receiving virtual instruction has been reduced to less than 10%. Clearly, an indicator the safety precautions put in place by the district created confidence with families sending their children back to our classrooms. We did this by primarily providing instruction five days a week. As of Friday, May 21, 2021, our high school has experienced only 10 days where it needed to pivot to virtual instruction and two "old fashioned" snow days. In short, we have been here all year (M-F) for our students, and we look forward to celebrating the end of the school year with an in-person graduation ceremony on Friday, May 28, 2021 to close out this historic school year! I can also reaffirm the efforts of our employees, myself included, have left them completely exhausted due to the ongoing challenges of this school year. However, I can also confidently say we have put the needs of our students front and center. In short, we have delivered!

If there is one downside to this school year, it was that despite so faithfully serving our students, our district, by a narrow margin, was unsuccessful in passing an operating referendum in April of 2021. Our board of education had worked for two years to carefully align an operating referendum with the November 2020 election. However, with our state-leading tourism industry crippled from the pandemic as well as low agricultural commodity prices, our board opted to delay this measure for an April 2021 referendum to allow both of these important sectors to better recover. Since then, both of these economic sectors are recovering nicely. Unfortunately, creating voter engagement and urgency fell a bit short and has caused our district to restructure some of our services heading into the 2021-22 school year. This includes the consolidation/closure of one of our three elementary schools, specifically, our Neenah Creek Elementary School located in Briggsville, Wisconsin. One of the primary reasons of the need to go to referendum is the antiquated and severely flawed funding system, and I will expand in much greater detail in the remainder of this correspondence.

### **2021-23 Biennial Budget & Funding Formula**

While I know our staff will be, once again, ready to serve our students with the start of the 2021-22 school year, I have many ongoing concerns about the biennium budget as well as the funding formula. The current yet antiquated failed funding formula that was intended to guarantee 2/3 funding from the state during the Thompson administration now sees the SDWD receive only \$1,238,848 (5.43%) of our revenue come from the state in the form of general aid and special adjustment aid. This is due to our incredibly high equalized valuation in the City of Wisconsin Dells and the Village of Lake Delton.

As such, I strongly encourage the legislature to work with the Governor to expand the financial supports for our district and more specifically on behalf of our 1,700-plus students. The first would be a categorical aid of sparsity funding. If allowed for a district of our size, this would bring an estimated \$172,300 of aid to the district. Certainly, the cost of transporting students to school is an ongoing and increasing expenditure.

The second request is to more fully fund special education. As we all know, this is one of the most underfunded, if not the most underfunded, program within the education budget. If the legislature were to meet the Governor's proposal of funding special education at a 50% rate, this would see an addition \$476,330 of revenue to educate our student population with the highest needs. I would encourage a 40% funding rate the first year of the biennium budget and the 50% rate in year two of the budget.

There is a distinct need for guaranteeing minimum per pupil aid and fixing the problem of declining aid for high property value school districts such as ours.

The current funding formula is a barrier to delivering the type of education that we would like to provide in the School District of Wisconsin Dells. Specifically, in the current school year the School District of Wisconsin Dells received \$792.65 of equalization aid per pupil as compared to the 2019-20 statewide average of \$5,353. This accounts for a difference \$4,560 per student. The current antiquated funding formula relies too heavily on the equalized valuation of the school district and does not take into effect one significant variable such as the average household income of the families that we so diligently and faithfully serve.

Please allow me to further share some information specific to the SDWD compiled the Association for Equity in Funding as well as technical data specific to our district compiled by RW Baird.

Wisconsin school districts have limited control over the amount of money they have to educate their students. Since 1993-94, the state government has imposed limits on the revenue school districts can receive from their two main funding sources: local property taxes and state aid.

In 1993-94, the SDWD revenue limit was set at \$5,289 per student, \$528 below the state average of \$5,817. In the same year, 24 school districts were allowed to have revenues of over \$7,500 per student! Funding gaps have grown worse since then.

Revenue limits in the SDWD have remained below the state average most years since 1993. In 2020-2021, its revenue limit is \$10,264 per student, \$1,181 below the state average of \$11,445 per student. New federal funding will help with pandemic-related costs, including learning losses. But these funds only last for a few years. These funding gaps will continue unless the legislature takes steps now to reform the state's school funding system.

The amount of money the SDWD spends to educate its students is constrained by its available revenue. Given its low per pupil revenue limit, Wisconsin Dells has had to rely on local revenue to attain spending of \$11,223 per student, \$707 lower than the state average of \$11,930. In other words, local property taxpayers have had to step up because the state is not fairly funding schools in the School District of Wisconsin Dells.

***In 2020-21, if the district's revenue limit were equal to the state average, its revenue would have been \$2,097,000 higher. If its revenue limit had been at the state average since 1993-94, it could have contributed \$25 million more to educating students.***

Our district not only faces the challenge of limited revenues. Its student body includes a heavy concentration of *high-needs* students.

- *52% of students are from low-income families.*
- *12% of students have disabilities requiring extra services.*
- *10% of students are learning English.*

Providing high-needs students with a quality education requires additional resources, but the state's funding system mostly disregards extra costs of educating these students.

- Wisconsin is one of only a few states that does not provide extra aid for students from low-income families.
- State aid covers only 28% of the extra costs to provide special education services.
- Wisconsin Dells receives no additional state aid to provide English language instruction.

To provide an adequate education to all its students, one that meets the state's academic performance standards, the Association of Equity in Funding (AEF) estimates the School District of Wisconsin Dells will need to increase spending by at least \$3,307 per student. At the current level of enrollment, this increase implies a spending gap of \$5.9 million. This is based on their conservative estimate of 40% higher costs for these students.

The AEF calls on the state legislature to close unfair funding gaps and recognize the additional costs incurred by districts serving high-needs students. Specifically, AEF proposes:

- Raising low revenue limits by \$300 per year, and closing gaps for low-revenue districts.
- Raising special education reimbursement to 45%, then 55% of actual costs.
- Providing \$150 of additional state aid per low-income student. *Our Business Manager estimates this would have generated \$146,000 in additional revenue this current school year.*
- Providing "Bilingual/Bicultural Aid" with a floor of \$10,000 and \$500/student.

We look forward to you working with your fellow members of the Legislature and finding some common ground with Governor Evers to assure the successful education of Wisconsin's children and specifically the School District of Wisconsin Dells. It is realized not every item mentioned in this correspondence will be addressed; however, it is incumbent that some of these items become a reality for the upcoming biennium budget.

During the 2020-21 school year, the School District of Wisconsin Dells has overcome some insurmountable challenges, and our staff is proud of the incredible service level the district has provided our students these last 15 months. Now it's time for our legislature and Governor to do the same on behalf of our students here at the School District of Wisconsin Dells.

Sincerely,



Terrance Slack