
WISCONSIN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION COUNCIL

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Testimony of Mary Bell, President of the Wisconsin Education Association Council before the Joint Committee on Finance, State of Wisconsin March 23, 2009

Good Morning. My name is Mary Bell. I am a library media specialist and English teacher and am currently serving as President of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the largest union of education employees in the state. WEAC's 98,000 membership is diverse and includes teachers, education support professionals, faculty and support staff in the Wisconsin Technical College System, and education and information professionals employed by the state. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about one of the most important issues facing Wisconsin: public education, and more specifically how it is affected by the proposed 2009-2011 State Budget.

The budget proposal introduced by Gov. Jim Doyle recognizes that we must all make sacrifices in light of Wisconsin's challenging economic conditions, but that there is no greater promise than the one we make to educate our children for the future. Investing in them reaps dividends for generations to come, and we cannot turn our backs on who we are and what we value – our children's education. Wisconsin has great schools because the people of our state have been committed to building great schools for generations – even in times of hardship. We urge the legislature to uphold our great tradition by passing the Governor's budget proposal with funding for schools intact.

I'd like to now speak to some of the specific features of the Governor's budget proposal that will affect public schools and colleges in Wisconsin.

- 1. Revenue Limit Flexibility.** Wisconsin's revenue control law is hurting public education and, in turn, our communities. The law assumes that all children cost the same to educate, when in reality many children require significantly more services than others. Revenue caps have forced school districts to cut programs and lay off staff, severely damaging the quality of education

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provided for students. While Governor Doyle does not repeal revenue caps in his budget proposal, he does provide school districts with greater flexibility under revenue limits to address school safety and nursing services, along with transportation costs. We support these changes. In addition, we support the proposed increase in the per student low-revenue ceiling, below which school districts are exempt from revenue limits. The proposed budget increases the limit from \$9,000 per student to \$9,400 in FY10 and to \$9,800 in FY11.

- 2. Increased Investments in Education.** In his budget proposal, Governor Doyle invests an additional \$426 million in public education over the biennium through a combination of General Purpose Revenue and federal funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act related to the state fiscal stabilization fund, Title I (low-income) and IDEA (special education). This investment includes increases to the General Equalization Aid by \$21.9 million in the second year of the budget, increasing Categorical Aid for the SAGE program, 4K Start-Up grants and High Poverty Aid.

We support these funding improvements, but urge the legislature not to assume they will solve the serious funding issues of Wisconsin's public schools. Layoffs and program cuts will still be part of the spring and summer news reports, though certainly not as deep as without this important investment. A thoughtful and comprehensive look at school funding is needed, if not with this budget, then in this legislative session. The School Finance Network proposal is, we believe, worthy of your attention as we, the citizens of Wisconsin engage in that conversation.

- 3. Collective bargaining law reform.** The Governor's budget also includes several changes to our collective bargaining law including repeal of the Qualified Economic Offer or "QEO", removing "greatest" and "greater" weight criteria in arbitration for school districts, allowing longer term contracts, as well as merging of bargaining units to promote efficiency and economies of scale. We support these changes for several reasons.

- a. **Collective Bargaining Reform will restore fairness to our bargaining law.** Collective bargaining is a basic right that Wisconsin's citizens support and value. Everyone in Wisconsin benefits when the voices of our teachers and support professionals are heard through a fair collective bargaining process. In 1993, Wisconsin's teachers were singled out and subjected to severe bargaining limitations that deny teachers the rights that other workers receive within our state. Restoring fairness to our bargaining law is an important step in turning the page on the politics of the past and moving Wisconsin forward. None of our neighboring states restrict teacher salaries under a system like the QEO (Qualified Economic Offer). Wisconsin can do without the QEO too.
- b. **It takes teamwork to build successful schools and collective bargaining reform can help to improve school quality.** In its current "one-sided" construction, the threat of the QEO cuts off discussion on important issues like class size, professional development, new approaches to teacher pay and other school quality issues. For the collective bargaining process to address school quality issues, our school officials, teachers and support professionals must work together on a level playing field. Bargaining reform will open the door to dialogue between teachers, support professionals and school officials, pushing them to think creatively and explore new approaches to old problems. The QEO will no longer serve as an excuse to avoid difficult conversations, because teachers and school districts will have the right to submit their wage proposals to a neutral arbitrator.
- c. **Collective Bargaining Reform will promote greater efficiency in our schools.** Collective bargaining reform proposed is more than just repealing the QEO. The bargaining reform offered through the Governor's budget creates new opportunities for greater administrative efficiency in our school districts. By allowing smaller groups of teachers and support professionals to join together for collective bargaining (both within

and across districts), school districts will be afforded new ways to share costs, pool purchases and resources, and take advantage of greater economies of scale. Also, allowing school districts to negotiate longer term collective bargaining agreements (up to 4 years) will dramatically reduce the legal and administrative costs associated with collective bargaining.

- d. **Our schools are among the best because of talented, caring and committed staff and collective bargaining reform will help schools attract and retain high quality teachers.** Historically, Wisconsin has benefited from having some of the best schools and teachers in the nation. This great tradition is threatened because our current collective bargaining law weakens our ability to attract and retain high quality teachers.

Since the Qualified Economic Offer was imposed:

- Teacher pay in Wisconsin has dropped from 15th in the nation to 21st – the lowest point in 40 years.
- Teacher salaries have lost 11% to inflation.
- Per capita income in Wisconsin (which measures the increase of all wage earners) has increased at more than twice the rate of teacher pay.

This happened because of caps on overall compensation. When health costs went up, pay went down to stay under the cap. But the QEO also involves “phantom” costing, where the salaries of teachers no longer employed by the district are included in the costs of salary adjustments. Educators, in other words, never receive the full 3.8% that appears on paper. Veteran teacher often received little or no increase, and salary schedules sometimes took rollbacks.

For the first time since passage of the QEO, starting teacher salaries are now higher in all of our neighboring states (even Iowa), making it even more difficult for Wisconsin to attract and retain great teachers. It’s time to give Wisconsin’s teachers a fair shake.

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4. **Modifications to the Milwaukee Private School Voucher Program.** The proposed budget includes provisions to hold voucher schools accountable and authorize DPI to hire an additional auditor to monitor voucher schools' compliance with state requirements. We support these changes because schools receiving public dollars should be transparent in their accountability to that public.

5. **The Budget restores fairness for Education Support Professionals under the Wisconsin Retirement System.** The budget proposes treating education support professionals (ESP) the same as teachers under the Wisconsin Retirement System by defining full-time employment based on a school year versus a calendar year for purposes of determining eligibility and for early retirement calculations. Education support professionals play an important role in making Wisconsin's public schools run effectively. Just like teachers, ESP help shape the minds and character of children, and help start young people on a path to becoming lifelong learners, responsible adults, and kind, caring citizens. The time spent by ESP in public schools should be given the same level of respect as other professions in public schools with fair treatment under the Wisconsin Retirement System.

6. **State Investment in the Technical Colleges.** The budget falls short for our technical colleges. Enrollments at the technical colleges are skyrocketing as dislocated workers and others seek to retool their skills. Technical colleges in areas hardest hit by layoffs – Janesville, Milwaukee, the Fox Valley, Wisconsin Rapids – have seen enrollments jump by as much as 25% this academic year. Despite increased demand, the technical colleges face a potential reduction in state funding of \$3.9 million over the biennium. *WEAC calls for a restoration of the reductions and an additional strategic state investment in Wisconsin's technical colleges to begin transforming our state's workforce by retooling and upgrading workers' skills.*

Financial aid for Wisconsin's technical college students is also inadequate. The state's primary need-based financial aid program for technical college students – the Wisconsin Higher Education Grant program – is being stretched thin. During the 2008-09 academic year, grants ran out earlier than ever before (August 2008). This is particularly problematic for technical college students, many of whom register outside the traditional fall enrollment period. Despite the clear financial need, technical college students receive only a small increase in the WHEG program while University of Wisconsin students receive a substantial WHEG increase. *WEAC calls for a more equitable distribution of state financial aid dollars across Wisconsin's higher education systems.*

We understand you have an extremely difficult task ahead in determining priorities for this biennial budget. Economic conditions in our state and our nation are putting the quality of life we treasure here in Wisconsin at risk. In addressing the needs of our state, the members of the Wisconsin Education Association Council ask you to remember that Wisconsin's great schools are the key to long-term, sustainable economic development. We are ready to take action on the important work before us each day in Wisconsin's schools. Maintaining Wisconsin's investment in children, in successful communities, in the lifelong education and preparation of our citizens for the jobs they need today and those they will need to be ready for into the future – that is in your hands as legislative leaders.

Thank you.