

Rural Schools Press Release

I'm John Gaier and I am the district administrator at the School District of Neillsville. Neillsville is a rural community with a population of about 2200 wonderful people located in the central part of our great state. We are a medium size district that serves approximately 1100 students. The children and taxpayers that I represent are not well-served by the proposed state budget, and if you have noticed the poor weather that we have been having since the proposed state budget was announced, it is pretty clear that Mother Nature doesn't think much of it either.

This proposed state budget begs the question, what do the citizens of Wisconsin really care about?

- Do we care that Wisconsin schools have been operating under a mathematically flawed revenue cap for two decades now? Revenues have never kept up to cost increases. Revenue caps that have been most devastating to our rural community schools.
- Do we care that this budget will mean ***less*** revenue for our declining enrollment rural districts in the state? My district will be losing \$325,528 under the current budget proposal.
- Do we care that in the last state budget reduced funding for our public schools by an average of \$550 per student to help eliminate a growing state deficit, but that the "tools" provided in the collective bargaining changes did not fully offset the reduction, so that funds had to be taken from other parts of local school budgets to balance those budgets? Funds that could have been spent directly for the educational benefit of students? Funds that could have helped retain and/or attract outstanding educators to our rural districts.
- Do we care that fixed costs continue to climb every year, but that public schools will get no more money, and in many cases even less money, to operate over the next two years? That means even more money will be

taken out of student programs to pay increased electrical, heating and transportation costs.

- Do we care that the very Career and Technical Education programs that business owners in our state say that our kids need to be career ready are being cut from many of our rural school districts in order to balance our budgets?
- Do we care that we have traded off equitable, 21st century educational opportunities for our children to reduce property taxes for our wealthiest property owners? Many of whom do not even live in our state. Please see tax levy credits as an example.
- Do we care that property tax costs will go up so that we can expand private school voucher programs? Private voucher programs that have not proven to increase student achievement. Private voucher programs that are not accountable to any local or state-wide taxpayers.
- Do we care that this budget is proposing to raise private school voucher aid from between \$800-\$1200 per student, while freezing any increase for public school students? Voucher aid in 2012-13 is already \$6600 per student and aid for Neillsville is \$5500 per student, so private voucher students are already aided at a higher rate than Neillsville's public school children.
- Do we care that this budget will help fund 25,000 private school voucher students while abandoning 850,000 public school children?
- Do we care that the proposed income tax cut in the state budget that will save the average taxpayer in Wisconsin between one and two dollars a week could be used to increase state support to public schools by \$343 million dollars?
- Do we care that this budget does nothing to help support special needs students and students living in poverty?
- Do we really care if every child in the state of Wisconsin receives the highest quality, 21st century education regardless of where they live, and that taxpayers across the state are treated equitably in the payment for our public schools?

I believe that the good people of Wisconsin do care.

- I applaud Senator Olsen and Senator Ellis for taking the bold step to propose a \$150 per student increase to the revenue cap. It isn't enough to fully recover from two decades of revenue caps, or last biennium's cuts to public education, but the \$150 per student increase will help, especially if it is offset with the appropriate equalization aid which provides the much needed equity for taxpayers.
- I applaud the growing number of legislators supporting the removal of the private school voucher expansion from the budget.
- I sincerely applaud State Superintendent Evers for his thoughtful and inspirational work on the Fair Funding for Our Future plan. It is an excellent proposal that would insure the sustainability of high quality, 21st century education for all of our children no matter where they live. Without the guarantee of sustainability it is increasingly difficult for our schools to be innovative in creating new opportunities for kids that will help them best prepare for their challenging future.
- I also applaud the educators across this state who have been working harder than ever before, many times under very stressful and difficult situations, to raise student achievement and to care for all of our children.

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of having the finest public schools in the country. I can see how it would be a huge political victory for private voucher advocates across the country to see this budget passed in Wisconsin. I'm sure their belief is that if they can win in the state where public education is outstanding, they can be successful in promoting their political agenda anywhere. However, I have faith that the citizens of Wisconsin will stand up for the public schools that have served them, their children and their grandchildren so well. The futures of 850,000 Wisconsin children depend on it.

