

## Wisconsin

*Lisa Lambert Snodgrass*

On July 8, 2021 the \$87.5 billion 2021-23 biennial budget was signed by Governor Evers. Evers acknowledged that with the Republican legislative leadership the 2021-203 budget was an improved version of previous budgets with appropriations for targeted underfunded areas<sup>1</sup>. However, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the health of Wisconsin citizens and thus while the fiscal recovery is improving, the state has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

### FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR P-12 AND/OR HIGHER EDUCATION

With the focus on economic recovery, equity and access, and safety, Gov. Evers' *Badger Bounceback Agenda* sought to restore the drastic cuts made to education in response to the 2020 pandemic and to ensure that the public education system, Pk-12 and post-secondary, was safer and stronger<sup>2</sup>. Legislative action included bipartisan support to return to the two-thirds funding model for Pk-12 in the 2021-23 biennial budget. This budget provides \$685 million net general and categorical school funding with an additional \$100 million in federal funds earmarked for public education. However, failure to reach bi-partisan agreement and pass legislation on increasing revenue caps, current revenue caps on districts spending persists, impacting the amount of funds available to these schools<sup>3</sup>.

The Pk-12 main funding priorities for both the Governor and Legislature included \$89 million over the biennium for students with disabilities, \$19 million for mental health, and \$125 million in continued expansion of broadband access. In contrast, the funding priorities from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction were focused on special education, mental health and equity. State Superintendent Taylor stressed the inequities in access that had grown as a result of the pandemic. She proposed allowing schools to use 2019 enrollment data for the 2021-22 funding formula to offset losses in enrollment in many districts.

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1. Office of the Governor, 20210708: *Evers 2021-23 Wisconsin budget veto message*. (July 8, 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/20985497-evers-2021-23-wisconsin-budget-veto-message-20210708>.

2. Ruth Conniff. Gov. Evers gives Legislature a second chance to fund school (July 9, 2021). Retrieved from <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/07/09/gov-evers-gives-legislature-a-second-chance-to-fund-schools/>.

3. Devin Willems, *Gov. Evers signs 2021-23 budget, provides one of the largest tax cuts in WI history* (July 8, 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.wearegreenbay.com/news/local-news/gov-evers-signs-2021-23-budget-provides-one-of-largest-tax-cuts-in-wi-history/>.

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Unfortunately, this proposal was denied<sup>4</sup>.

*Challenges to the funding priorities:* The Wisconsin Association for Equity in Funding (WAEF) agrees with State Superintendent Taylor that the 2021-23 budget widens the gap in inequity in school funding. The organization has filed a lawsuit citing a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling upholding the fundamental right to equal opportunity to education and asserting that the signed budget widens inequity gaps in school funding thus failing to meet the basic standard of the law.

#### CHANGES TO THE FUNDING FORMULA FOR P-12 AND/OR HIGHER EDUCATION

No changes were made to the funding formula. The three-tiered equalization formula uses a three equation formula to calculate the cost sharing between the state and the local district. With the 2021-2023 budget with the addition of a one time \$100 million in federal funds allocation, the per pupil expenditures were increased by \$120 yearly. This tops previous per pupil investments making this the largest nominal increase for P-12 education spending to a biennium budget since 2005-07 placing the 2021 per pupil rate as \$12,466, just under the national average, \$12,624<sup>5</sup>.

#### PRESSING STATE ISSUES

Equity and access continue to be a key focus areas for Wisconsin's PK-12 and post-secondary institutions, made more prominent during the pandemic. Budget measures to decrease equity issues, particularly racial disparities, were culled by legislators. Examples of culled measures intended to impact systemic issues include creating a diversity, equity and inclusion grant program, increased funding of \$28 million for low income students/families, increased funding for English-language learners, expanding American Indian studies in PK-12 schools, and providing post-secondary in-state tuition eligibility for undocumented immigrants<sup>6</sup>.

The Wisconsin technical colleges and University of Wisconsin system have been heavily impacted by the pandemic. These systems bore the brunt of the state's budget cuts in 2020 and had hoped for increased budget support in the

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4. *U.S. Public Education Spending Statistics*. (Aug. 2, 2021). Retrieved from <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics#wisconsin>

5. Kids Forward: Every Kid. Every Family. Every Community. *Opportunity Wasted: Legislature removes nearly all items promoting racial equity from the state budget*, (July 2021). Retrieved from [https://kidsforward.org/assets/2021\\_4\\_gov\\_budget\\_equity.docx.pdf](https://kidsforward.org/assets/2021_4_gov_budget_equity.docx.pdf).

6. Lisa Lambert Snodgrass. (2021). Wisconsin. *Journal of Education Finance* 46(3), pp. 380-382.

2021-23 biennium<sup>7</sup>. Wisconsin's WTCS and UW system leaders called for greater support for equity and access initiatives like the continuation of tuition freeze in the UW system and an expansion of the "Bucky's Tuition Promise" program at UW- Madison, a program that offers four years of tuition waived for students whose families earn less than \$60,000 annually.

#### ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION OPTIONS

In Wisconsin there are several alternative education options: private school education, GED, and an Alternative Education program. In the Republican led legislature there is continued pressure to expand funding for the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program, a statewide private school voucher program. The financial impact to school districts is estimated to be nearly \$9,000 per student loss in general aid for students who select private education over public.

#### **State Per Pupil Expenditure**

\$12,466

#### **Allocation of State dollars and percent of State budget for P-12 and HE**

State total = PK-12 is \$685 million plus a one-time allocation of \$100 million from Federal Covid Relief funds.

= HE is \$676,498.107 million

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7. Rich Kremer. *Evers wants \$226 million more for higher education*, (February 2021). Retrieved from <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2021/02/17/evers-wants-226-million-more-for-higher-education/>.