

Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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November 11, 2004

Governor James Doyle
Wisconsin State Capitol
P.O. Box 7863
Madison, WI 53707

Re: Comments on DPI 2005-07 Budget Proposal

Dear Governor Doyle:

As co-chairs of the Survival Coalition of Disability organizations, we are writing to encourage your support of four major provisions of the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) proposal biennial budget. In addition, we want to encourage you to support one low cost item that could have significant payback for the children of Wisconsin in the future, which DPI did not include in its budget.

Specifically, we are very encouraged that Superintendent Burmaster accepted four key recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on Excellence in Education, as follows:

1. The Task Force proposed providing \$60 million in additional pupil transportation categorical aid. The State Superintendent's budget recommends a lower figure of \$42 million over the biennium in increased pupil transportation categorical aid for all districts transporting students to school, with additional aid for geographically large districts transporting students more than 12 miles from school each way. Although we prefer the Task Force recommendation, which would help all children in rural districts, including those with special needs, we understand that in these tight fiscal times, adoption of Superintendent Burmaster's budget proposal would go a long way towards rectifying the State's failure to increase school transportation aids for over two decades.
2. The Task Force proposed providing \$56 million for students with disabilities. However, the State Superintendent's budget wisely recommends the higher amount of \$74 million over the biennium in increased special education categorical aid just to be able to continue to reimburse local school districts 30% of their special education costs. This is

still much lower than the Legislature's original intentions for the proportion of special education costs that the state would cover. In addition, the State Superintendent's budget also adopts another Task Force proposal in the form of \$10 million in new categorical funding for districts with high cost pupils whose costs exceed three times the statewide average. We strongly encourage you to adopt both of these provisions to help avert a crisis in special education funding, which has been exacerbated by the state's failure to significantly increase special education funding in 5 of the past 6 biennial budgets. However, we do have one concern which is DPI's proposal to include school counselors in the categorical aid for special education. If this proposal merely seeks to provide a percentage of reimbursement for school counseling services which are directed towards students in special education, then we have no problem with this change. However, if this becomes a way for school counseling to receive special education dollars for work done on behalf of regular education students, then the whole point of the categorical aid funding mechanism will be rendered moot. We encourage you to seek clarification from DPI about this provision, and to make the necessary corrections in your budget proposal.

3. The Task Force recommended providing \$41 million for early education and students in poverty. The State Superintendent's budget recommends an additional \$55 million over the biennium for school districts currently participating in the SAGE program and \$1.2 million for new districts to enter the program in 2006-07. We fully support increasing SAGE funding, which benefits all children, including children with disabilities, who have a better opportunity to be included with their regular education peers when class sizes are lower, and may even avoid the need for special education services due to increased individualized attention in the early grades. In addition, the State Superintendent's budget recommends \$3 million in 2006-07 to provide districts with an incentive to implement four-year-old kindergarten (4K) programs, which we support for the same reasons we support increasing the SAGE budget.
4. The Task Force recommended providing \$24 million for English Language Learners (ELL). The State Superintendent's budget recommends an additional \$31 million over the biennium for school districts required to provide bilingual-bicultural programs for ELL. The State Superintendent's budget also recommends providing \$11 million over the biennium for all school districts educating ELL throughout the state. We fully support both of these DPI proposals as an increasing number of children with special needs come from non-English speaking homes and will benefit from this increased support, which is generally not provided by special education programming.
5. The Task Force recommended a "cost out" study to define what constitutes a sound, basic education and how much it costs to provide it. It is estimated that such a study would cost roughly \$100,000 to complete. The State Superintendent's budget does not include this proposal, recognizing this is something that should be determined by the

Governor. This low cost idea will have a profound effect on determining how much is really needed to provide all of Wisconsin's children with an adequate education, using sound economic and educational principles that many other states have utilized. For the future of Wisconsin's public school system, we strongly encourage you to add this provision to your budget proposal.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions about our recommendations.

Sincerely,



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