

June 24, 2002

MEMO

TO: CONFERENCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

FROM: QUALITY EDUCATION COALITION

Contacts: Jeffrey Spitzer-Resnick, Chairperson (608) 267-0214

Judi Bradshaw-Rouse, Parent member (608) 233-1832

RE: SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

The Quality Education Coalition (QEC) is Wisconsin's statewide coalition of parents and advocates which works to improve the quality of special education supports and services to Wisconsin's children through advocating systemic improvement in special education. One of QEC's top priorities for the last decade has been to increase the state's portion of special education funding to local school districts. Sadly, your action last week refusing to adopt the Senate budget provision which would have increased special education funding by \$27 million or even a lesser compromise figure, confirms that Wisconsin's legislators simply do not prioritize quality special education. The plain truth is that for 8 of the last 10 years, Wisconsin has failed to increase its funding for special education by a single penny.

Over the last 5 years, QEC and every other stakeholder in Wisconsin's special education system has repeatedly stressed the dire nature of our underfunded special education system. This has been compounded by the existence of revenue caps which have forced those who desire quality special education programs for their children and students to compete for that funding with those who desire quality regular education programs. The real truth is that all of Wisconsin's children need adequate funding for their education as most children who receive special education participate fully or partially in regular education programming. Indeed, one of the goals of special education is to help children with disabilities become adults who enter our work force and become full tax paying members of our society.

Thus, this failure to sufficiently fund special education directly affects the nearly 12% of Wisconsin's school age children who have special needs, and indirectly affects every child in every school district. In a recent study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, of the 39 responding states, only 4 states (Arizona, Colorado, Maryland and Oklahoma) forced their local school districts to contribute a higher percentage of funding to special education than Wisconsin. This study reveals that as of the 1998-99 school year, Wisconsin's local school districts were forced to cover 65% of total special education costs. The latest action by the Conference Committee will only exacerbate this crisis.

Clearly, in an era of tight budgets, we understand that the legislature must set priorities. We also understand, that during the last budget, although many in the legislature claimed that children with disabilities were a priority, no additional funding for special education was approved. It is plain that the Senate Democrats sought to increase special education funding by decreasing funding to

school choice. This is not a trade-off which parents of children with disabilities sought. However, it is equally unfair to restore school choice funding while failing to resolve the crisis in special education funding.

This unsought trade-off between school choice and special education funding is especially tragic when it is clear that according to the UW-Milwaukee's web site, Empowering Parents for Informed Choices (www.uwm.edu/EPIC/), these private schools do not generally welcome students with disabilities. On this Web site, for example, Emmaus Lutheran declares that it cannot serve students who have cognitive, learning or emotional disabilities. Harambee Community School has no special education teachers. Blessed Sacrament explains that, "students who are 2-3 years below grade level cannot be realistically brought up to grade level," because the school lacks tutorial and other programs. Yet, another school reports that it, "cannot serve wheelchair-bound students." All told, DPI found that, as of 2 years ago, only 8 percent Milwaukee's voucher schools offered any special education services at all.

The unavailability of choice schools to students with disabilities is even more tragic given that the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) district is on the receiving end of a massive class action law suit brought by the Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy (WCA) which claims that MPS grossly and systemically fails to provide appropriate special education supports and services for the nearly 17,000 kids with disabilities who attend MPS. Thus, funding school choice while failing to address the special education funding crisis only exacerbates a horrible situation for kids with disabilities in Milwaukee.

We realize that this letter is not likely to change the course of the Conference Committee's work. However, we hope you understand that we will not remain silent during this continuing tragedy created by the legislature. We fully expect a substantial increase in special education funding in the 2003-05 biennial budget.