The Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance is an alliance of:

The Association of Wisconsin School Administrators
The Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators
The Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials
The Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services
The Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators - Affiliate
INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to think of a bigger state priority than ensuring every Wisconsin student graduates from high school prepared for college and career success. This is particularly crucial when one considers that education is among the most important determinants of success and prosperity in life—from a person’s health and lifetime earning potential to meaningful participation in civic activities. Now, perhaps more than ever, the quality of education we provide our children determines not only their individual futures, but also the collective social and economic wellbeing of the entire state. To realize our vision of preparing all students to be college and career ready (as defined in Appendix 1), it is imperative that we continue to raise the academic bar for all children and close gaps for lower-performing groups.

Wisconsin has large and persistent achievement and graduation gaps that impact the future success of too many of our children and our state. Nearly one in five Wisconsin children live in poverty. Only 10 states had faster rates of increasing child poverty than Wisconsin between 2010 and 2014.1 Considering that poverty is one of the major risk factors for children developing mental health problems and is tied to structural differences in several areas of the brain associated with school readiness skills, it behooves us to invest in evidence-informed policies proven to equal opportunity, achievement and economic success.2 3 We can prepare our students of color, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners for career and college.

Wisconsin’s educators can and will meet this imperative, but only if the state’s policymakers commit to evidence-based policies proven to drive whole-system improvement at the classroom, school, district and state levels. Committing to evidence-based policies and prioritizing the goal that Wisconsin schools graduate every student college and career-ready is the right way forward for our students, as well as for our civic and economic growth. If prioritizing education and evidence-based policy is the right path, the wrong path is to see education primarily as a cost to be minimized and to base state policy more on ideology or emotion rather than on evidence.

The following policy recommendations were created through the careful consideration of our state’s past educational successes, along with lessons learned from world leaders in

2 Mental Health, Poverty & Development, World Health Organization
student learning. National and international exemplars—such as Massachusetts, Ontario and Finland (see Appendix 2)—have demonstrated high levels of academic achievement. In each case, policymakers have:

- Invested in highly trained and motivated teachers
- Designed accountability systems focused on effective intervention at the school and student levels
- Provided adequate and equitable funding
- Ensured that all students are ready to learn by addressing early childhood development, health care and poverty

The policy recommendations that follow provide a policy pathway for ensuring that our system of public education is the best in the world. Wisconsin students and citizens deserve no less.

This document presents the biennial policy agenda of the School Administrators Alliance (SAA) for the upcoming state budget cycle and legislative session, set to begin following the November 2016 general election. The document builds on the many strengths of public education in our state, but also outlines several of the clear challenges we face (see Appendix 3). The SAA is an organization representing principals (through the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, or AWSA), superintendents (through the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, or WASDA), school business officials (through the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials, or WASBO), directors of special education (through the Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services, or WCASS) and human resource directors (through the Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators, or WASPA) in Wisconsin’s 422 public school districts and more than 2,200 public schools.

SAA’s policy agenda has been formulated by a work group that has met regularly since the summer of 2016 to identify key policy issues, review relevant research and formulate specific policy recommendations intended to address these issues. We thank the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for preparing the research briefs that informed this work.

The SAA policy recommendations are organized around five key areas, as follows:

- Students Ready to Learn
- Supporting Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- Innovation
A. STUDENTS READY TO LEARN

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Although Wisconsin has taken steps to improve early childhood education with the expansion of 4K funding and the YoungStar program to support childcare provider quality, the state has yet to realize a comprehensive preschool policy.

Research has demonstrated that adults who had access to preschool programming have higher earnings, are more likely to hold a job, commit fewer crimes and are more likely to graduate from high school than those who did not have access to preschool. Numerous studies have confirmed that children from poor families are at a significant social and academic deficit by the time they reach their third birthday, and that improving the quality of preschool education can help reduce achievement gaps for starting kindergartners.

Barriers to providing and accessing quality early childhood care include the following:

- **Income**: Quality preschool programs are expensive, costing parents an average of between $9,000 to more than $11,000 per year in Wisconsin.
- **Convenience and affordability**: Parents must both work and choose care that is available. For many, this means making preschool choices based on convenience and affordability, but not necessarily on quality.
- **Quality**: Early childhood providers vary considerably in terms of credentials and the qualifications of staff members.

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• **Funding:** Overall funding levels for school-based early childhood programs were reduced during the recent economic downturn. And, as a result of economic conditions, many states also cut pre-kindergarten expansion efforts and their monitoring of early childhood providers.

The good news is that Wisconsin has a strong base from which to build and maintain a comprehensive preschool program. The Badger state’s four-year-old kindergarten program and YoungStar programs provide a foundation for offering high-quality early learning opportunities for all Wisconsin children.

The state’s community-based approach to four-year-old kindergarten (4K) brings a broad range of early childhood actors together around the common goal of supporting the emotional, educational and physical wellbeing of children. Today, families have access to quality 4K programming in 97 percent of Wisconsin school districts.6

YoungStar is a program the state Department of Children and Families created to improve the quality of child care for Wisconsin children. It seeks to improve quality by evaluating and rating the care given by childcare providers, helping parents choose the best childcare for their children, supporting providers with tools and training to deliver high-quality early care and setting a consistent standard for childcare quality.

Although YoungStar has made great progress in moving children into higher-quality programs, the funding base for childcare programs is increasingly inadequate and unstable. In the last seven years, state funding for Wisconsin Shares, which supports YoungStar, has dropped by $130 million per year, and the number of children served has dropped by more than 12,000. The average monthly payment per child has been reduced by 18 percent. This erosion of support for the childcare payment system is undermining the YoungStar system. The Wisconsin Shares/YoungStar program can have a significant impact on children who have a high probability of not being ready for school (including students of low socioeconomic status), and therefore should be funded properly.

Wisconsin is also home to a successful evidence-based home visiting program and a publicprivate partnership network that supports local communities in leveraging resources to support early childhood education. The Family Foundations Home Visiting Program supports four nationally recognized, evidence-based models that help vulnerable new parents develop good parenting skills and promote their children’s healthy growth and

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development. Studies of high-quality home-visiting programs have demonstrated promising results, including reductions in the numbers of low-birth weight babies, reductions in child abuse and neglect rates and improvements in academic achievement and graduation rates. The Children’s Empowerment Through Education (CETE) network builds on successful models implemented in Arizona and Iowa. The network consists of a state hub that provides tools and support to local coalitions to build capacity to leverage community resources. Both programs have a solid track record and could have an even greater impact on early childhood if scaled up.7

Wisconsin should build on its strong tradition of supporting early childhood education by committing to a comprehensive preschool policy. Improving early childhood opportunities will help prepare children for their PK-12 education experience and help reduce achievement gaps. These investments in early childhood also yield an extraordinarily high public return on investment. In fact, Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman estimates that every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education generates a 7 to 10 percent annual rate of return through higher worker productivity, lower education costs, reduced crime and less government assistance.8

Policy Recommendations:

1. Key stakeholders involved in early childhood programming in Wisconsin (including the Department of Health Services and the Department of Public Instruction) should convene to focus on three key issues:
   a. Identification of key indicators for monitoring quality and accountability of early childhood education systems in Wisconsin. These indicators could be used to establish a baseline for monitoring progress over time with respect to core measures of access and quality.
   b. Strengthen coordination between school districts and county government around the provision of mental health and social services to children. One specific example would be having county social workers establish regular working hours within school facilities to reduce transit time and limit absences for children.
   c. Publish an annual report detailing Wisconsin’s progress toward providing every Wisconsin child the opportunity to participate in a high-quality

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7 Recommendations to the Governor, Governor’s Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2015.

preschool program, and share exemplary models of coordination at the local level.\(^9\)

2. **Increase state support:**\(^{10}\)
   - To reverse the deep funding cuts to the Wisconsin Shares program.
   - For quality improvement under YoungStar to double the number of Wisconsin children (approximately 9,300 currently) in high-quality childcare programs over five years.
   - To double the number of families served (approximately 1,300 currently) in the evidence-based Family Foundations Home Visiting Program over five years.
   - To expand the Children’s Empowerment Through Education (CETE) network to more Wisconsin communities.

**CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH**

In Wisconsin, too many children have unmet mental health needs, with these unmet needs having serious negative consequences for the individual, their families and our communities and schools. The fact is that children’s mental health needs go unmet too often because of systemic shortcomings in how such services are provided. The Johnson Foundation’s *Top of Mind* report identified these shortcomings as poor system and service coordination, multiple barriers to access care, high service costs and limited funding and workforce and service shortages.\(^{11}\)

Best evidence indicates that mental ill-health and poverty are linked and cyclical poverty increases the risk of mental disorders, and that having a mental disorder increases the likelihood of a person descending into poverty.\(^{12}\)

Wisconsin should develop a comprehensive school mental health agenda that provides:
   - Universal training for all educators related to students’ mental health and traumainformed care

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\(^9\) This and other sections in this report include references to further reading about the covered topics. See Appendix X for list of additional reading sources.

\(^{10}\) *Recommendations to the Governor, Governor’s Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2015.*


\(^{12}\) World Health Organization, The WHO MIND Project: Mental Improvement for Nations Development.
• Targeted screening and intervention that includes support for screening, brief intervention (SBIRT) and support for school psychologists and social workers to provide these crucial interventions
• Access to care by providing grants for community-school mental health collaborations and expanding Medicaid to cover critical services currently not covered

Universal Training
State support for educators’ universal training related to students’ mental health and trauma-informed care is critical. The ability to learn for children who either have experienced or are experiencing trauma is compromised, sometimes severely so. For educators to respond effectively to traumatized children, they need to understand what trauma is and how they can work to overcome its negative impacts. Youth Mental Health First Aid and Trauma Sensitive Schools are two professional learning opportunities that should be made available for all Wisconsin educators.\textsuperscript{13}

Targeted Screening and Intervention
All school districts need the capacity to screen students and intervene those who are suffering from trauma or a mental health condition. School social workers, school psychologists and mental health professionals are critical to providing both screening and intervention services. In Wisconsin, staffing levels for these positions are far below nationally recommended levels. For example, in 2016, there was one social worker for every 1,528 students, whereas the national recommendation is to have one social worker for every 400 students.\textsuperscript{14}

Access to Care
The state of Minnesota has begun to successfully address children’s access to mental health services through a grant program supporting school-linked mental health. This grant program has leveraged federal, state and local efforts to dramatically improve services to children. These school-connected clinical mental health treatments include interventions that achieve the following:

• Increase accessibility for children and youth who are uninsured or underinsured
• Improve clinical and functional outcomes for children and youth with a mental health diagnosis

\textsuperscript{13} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2017-19 State Budget Request.
\textsuperscript{14} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2017-19 State Budget Request.
• Improve identification of mental health issues for children and youth

The Minnesota initiative has found success by connecting or co-locating mental health services providers with schools and has proven particularly effective in reaching children who have never accessed mental health services before. As a result of the program, many children with serious mental health needs were first identified, including 45 percent of children who met the criteria for being seriously emotionally disturbed. This increased access was particularly important for students from cultural and ethnic minority communities.15

Not surprisingly, school districts in Minnesota are documenting improved behavioral and academic progress for students whose mental health needs are being met. The Minneapolis Public Schools, for example, has documented a decrease in suspensions and increased attendance and academic achievement, something that is attributed to the program.16

Although expanded school mental health has the potential to increase access for families who want their children to receive needed services in the school setting, a lack of adequate funding for mental health services is a continuing challenge. Medicaid reimbursement rates are much lower than the cost to provide mental health therapy. Additionally, Medicaid does not pay for school mental health consultation, a critical component for effective school-based services.17 Wisconsin must expand Medicaid to provide counseling services by third-party providers within the school setting.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Create a school-linked mental health grant program. The program would provide five-year grants that provide funding for startup costs to provide services to children who are uninsured. Grants would also be used for coordination between school, county and mental health providers.

2. Fund a new Medicaid payment code for mental health consultation with school staff by a licensed mental health provider.

15 Minnesota Department of Health Services: School Linked Mental Health Services Top of Mind Johnson Foundation, 2012

16 Mark Sander, Senior Clinical Psychologist, Hennepin County/Minneapolis Public Schools, WI Community Briefing, April 2, 2014.

17 Wisconsin Coalition for Expanding School-Based Mental Health, Proposal for Expanded School Mental Health Services, July 1, 2016.
3. Increase Medicaid payment rates for individual and group therapy.
4. Increase financial support to meet the enormous need for screening and intervention services in schools.
5. Create a new categorical aid program to provide incentives for school districts to expand services provided by school social workers.

**SUMMER LEARNING**

Research has long indicated that students generally lose skills during the traditional three-month summer vacation. A study by Rand Education/Wallace Foundation (2011) also found that the “summer slide” disproportionately affected low-income students, thereby exacerbating achievement gaps, particularly in reading. While higher-income students posted slight gains in reading over the summer, low-income students showed significant losses by summer’s end. Perhaps the study’s most disturbing conclusion is that it appears that summer learning loss is cumulative and that, over time, it contributes substantially to the achievement gap.18

Fortunately, many school districts across the country are finding ways to combat the summer slide with innovative summer school models. Although traditional summer school tends to focus on remediation for students who failed one or more classes, more contemporary models make summer school essentially an extension of the school year, with skill-building classes taught in different ways and with enrichment opportunities similar to those found in education-focused summer camps.

A study by researchers at the University of Rochester Medical Center found that students who were allowed to select books to take home over the summer break saw lower rates of literacy loss. The study also found that 75 percent of students who were allowed to select books improved their reading levels, compared to a one-month literacy loss in previous studies.19

Research generally indicates that summer programs have positive effects on student achievement. However, the Rand/Wallace Foundation study emphasizes that school districts must maximize quality instruction, small class sizes, parental involvement and regular attendance to achieve desired outcomes.

Summer programs represent an additional cost to districts, and research identifies cost as the primary barrier to implementing high-quality summer learning programs. Wisconsin school administrators have cited inadequate resources—for transporting students (critical in rural areas), recruiting high-quality staff, offering engaging enrichment activities and partnering with community-based organizations to offer full-day programs (to meet the needs of working families)—as the major impediments to achieving the desired outcomes.

Additionally, research shows that high-quality summer school programs boost student achievement and can end the summer slide, while helping to close achievement gaps. With targeted increases in funding and more local control to innovate, Wisconsin should see more positive results.

Policy Recommendations:
1. The Department of Public Instruction, working in conjunction with state researchers and stakeholders, should gather and disseminate information on which districts in Wisconsin have implemented programs (such as the successful Rochester summer reading program) designed to address summer learning loss, the characteristics of these programs and how successful they have been.
2. Increase funding for summer school transportation.
3. Allow school districts to count summer school students at 1.0 FTE for revenue limit and state general aid purposes.
4. Simplify the aid calculation process. Allow districts the flexibility to innovate and enhance services to children at the local level.

B. SUPPORTING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING & LEADERSHIP

Educator Development
The most important school factor determining whether students achieve academically is the knowledge and skills of the classroom teacher. Principal leadership represents the second most important school-based factor for student success. It is critically important, therefore, that we engage in comprehensive state and local strategies to build individual and collective educator capacity, from pre-service training to in-service improvement efforts.

Improving educator preparation programs (EPPs) must involve three important facets: 1) inputs, which involve how candidates are recruited/selected into programs, 2) pre-service
development, including the content and quality of the preparation programs themselves and 3) outputs, the competencies and skills of graduates, along with the ongoing support and development provided to them once they begin their careers. Pre-service programs should also build teacher and principal candidate awareness and skills to successfully carry out major initiatives such as the Educator Effectiveness process, Wisconsin student academic standards and the student Academic and Career Planning process.

Recent research has identified several issues and challenges facing EPPs.

**Key Research Findings:**

- Studies show that EPPs struggle to lure high academic-performing college attendees to teacher training programs. College graduates with the highest levels of measured ability tend to choose careers other than teaching. Evidence also shows that teachers with higher measured abilities have a higher probability of leaving the teaching profession.
- Pre-service testing requirements appear to adversely affect the entry of ethnically diverse candidates into teaching.
- Colleges that are more selective in their admissions produce more effective teachers.
- Candidates with higher academic credentials have higher turnover rates when districts do not address factors such as salary, working conditions and prestige. High-performing teachers who have the most options to leave the classroom tend to do so more often where these factors are not effectively addressed.
- Attrition rates for teachers are higher in schools with higher proportions of minority, low-income and low-performing students.
- “True” real wages of teachers have declined in comparison with wages for other college graduates, and studies repeatedly show that higher salaries are associated with higher teacher retention rates.

The importance of rigorous preparation programs is quite evident, but the nature of what those programs should entail is less clear:

- Teacher preparation helps candidates develop the knowledge and skills they need in the classroom.
- The literature comparing traditional preparation programs and alternative certification programs is sparse, and the studies tend to suffer from measurement and methodological issues.
- Both strong content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge are important elements of high-quality teacher preparation programs.
- Well-prepared teachers are more likely to remain in the profession.
• New educators tend to report they were not adequately prepared to meet challenges in the classroom.

Although the research on leadership preparation is less established, many of the above factors also appear to apply to principal pre-service training. Further, while demands and expectations on principal performance continue to increase, particularly for instructional leadership, the role is isolated and on-the-job support can be sporadic or unavailable, contributing to burnout and turnover. In addition to school disruption, turnover results in substantial costs to districts for the recruitment, selection and onboarding of new principals.

Industrialized nations whose students outperform the United States tend to invest heavily in pre-service preparation. Compared to the U.S., these nations have very different teacher preparation criteria—marked by more extensive advanced coursework and specialization in content knowledge, more rigorous selection and admissions criteria, more pedagogical content and general pedagogical preparation, exit exams and certification and licensing exams. Similarly, countries that outperform the United States have different pay, incentives and working conditions that may better attract and retain higher-quality educators in the teaching professions.

Implications:

There is a conflict between two key factors related to the recruitment, preparation and retention of effective educators. While the evidence suggests that more selective and rigorous educator preparation programs are connected to improved student outcomes, compensation, working conditions, personal satisfaction, morale and societal respect for the profession deter talent from entering and remaining in the profession. The problem is increasingly evident in Wisconsin, with district leaders reporting shortages of qualified candidates not only in typically hard-to-staff positions (e.g., math, science and special

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Those nations whose students outperform U.S. students not only have more rigorous preparation programs, but also have reward and incentive structures in place. These, in turn, contribute to the prestige of the profession, which then serves to attract and retain top candidates.

**Policy Recommendations:**

1. The State Superintendent should convene a commission to advance recommendations for policy and regulatory rule changes to address issues identified in Excellence in Teaching and Leadership. The commission should explore both short term solutions to acute shortage issues and longer-term policy change initiatives.

   Considerations should include:
   
   a. Create a state-wide strategy to identify and recruit talented candidates into teacher and administrator preparation programs, with an emphasis on diversity.
   
   b. Conduct a review of Wisconsin teacher and administrator preparation programs and make recommendations on how best to prepare and support educators (e.g., through formal residencies as done in Finland and other high achieving countries).
   
   c. Ensure that training programs prepare educators for the Wisconsin State Learning Standards, Educator Effectiveness process and Academic and Career Planning process.
   
   d. Fully explore viable alternative options for teacher certification. Much of John Hattie’s research has shown that in educator preparation, there is far more variation within the group of certified teachers than between the group of traditionally certified versus alternatively certified teachers. This is supported by a study by economists Kane, Rockoff and Staiger. The following contains several editorial reactions to the work done by Kane, Rockoff and Staiger: \url{http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20072_06.pdf}

f. Examine all recommendations related to teacher preparation and induction included in the National Conference of State Legislators report of August 2016: “No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State.”

g. Examine all elements included in the Professional Standards Council’s strategic plan of November 2016: “Wisconsin Talent Development Plan.”

**Educator Growth and Support**

Educator development does not end once educators finish their pre-service training. Research demonstrates that teaching effectiveness increases most rapidly in the first three to five years in the profession. Induction, mentoring and performance evaluation are needed to help foster educator growth in the early professional years. More experienced educators also benefit from ongoing support through coaching and evaluation.

PI 34 was established to help guide educators and encourage districts to support them through mentoring and to advance with license renewal. Act 166 led to the development and implementation of a statewide Educator Effectiveness System. These systems depend on local school and district administrators and educators to implement them with integrity. Effective implementation relies on resources and positive working conditions that promote trust, collaboration and collective capacity building. Relying on accountability-driven policies alone will not lead to excellence.

**Key Research Findings:**

- Teacher quality and principal leadership are the two most important school-based factors influencing student achievement. Teaching quality varies more within schools than between schools.

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• Principals influence school working conditions, including trust, opportunities for collaboration and academic focus. These factors, in turn, influence school productivity and other important outcomes, such as teacher retention.26

• Educator growth and development may be enhanced by teacher and leader evaluation systems characterized by the following five conditions: 1) a context of trust that encourages risk-taking, 2) the use of common performance competency model (i.e., Framework for Teaching; Stronge/CESA 6 teacher performance evaluation system standards) for instructional and leadership dialog, 3) instilling educators with a sense of ownership on their goals, 4) continuous improvement through collaboration and feedback and 5) strategic connections to school and district improvement strategies.27

• Teacher evaluation requirements create higher expectations for principals to implement evaluation practices with fidelity, provide timely instructional feedback, complete more observations and assess more areas of practice and teacher impact on student growth (i.e., through SLOs). Principals and district leaders will be required over time to learn and refine strategies to address the time demands of the new systems, and will need additional support to manage these new roles.

Policy Recommendations:

1. The Department of Public Instruction is encouraged to continue engaging CESAs, professional associations and school districts to help facilitate cross-district learning about efficient evaluation structures and growth-oriented evaluation practices to address capacity issues while maintaining overall system quality and fidelity.

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2. DPI should also continue to monitor emerging research and policy implications from other states around effective teacher and administrator evaluation systems to make any needed updates or adaptations to address capacity issues with implementation and the priority for growth-focused evaluations.


4. Make available resources to support districts with instructional and leadership coaching.

C. INNOVATION/RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Wisconsin must develop a PK-12 educational innovation/research and development strategy. The strategy should provide incentives for districts to implement innovative practices that evidence suggests will improve student learning, and include rigorous performance evaluations that provide guidance for practitioners and policymakers to continuously improve teaching and learning.

Overall, the United States spends about 3 percent of its total expenditures on research and development, with that figure reaching as high as 23 percent in pharmaceuticals. In education, however, .002 percent of expenditures are spent on research and development. Increasing effectiveness and innovation requires identifying promising approaches, testing those approaches rigorously and disseminating results.28

Policy Recommendations:

The SAA believes that the state of Wisconsin should create a PK-12 educational innovation/research and development strategy, overseen by the Department of Public Instruction, with input from an advisory panel that includes representatives from PK-12 educators, higher education organizations, parental organizations, student leadership organizations and business leaders. The innovation strategy should:

- Include a robust system for the evaluation of innovative practices
- Provide for the intentional dissemination of information related to innovative practices that have been shown to improve student learning, as well as practices that have not been shown to improve student learning

• Leverage research being conducted by Wisconsin educators pursuing advanced degrees
• Position Wisconsin well to attract grant dollars in the emerging context of “Pay for Success” funding
• Consider ways to provide small “seed” grants to districts and schools to implement promising strategies designed to address key issues, such as the closing of achievement gaps, with a requirement that these strategies be evaluated and the findings disseminated to statewide audiences—similar to the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation grant series

D. FINANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

SCHOOL FINANCE
Historically, Wisconsin has ranked relatively well on school finance equity measures. However, the state share of school funding has shrunk in real dollars over the past decade, and districts sustained large funding cuts in 2011. Additionally, Wisconsin school districts suffer from the systemic gap between allowable revenue growth under revenue limits and inflationary increases in school district costs.

In such an unstable environment, school districts across Wisconsin must stretch limited resources. The impacts are not equal across districts. They are more serious in districts with a large share of higher-needs students (including those in poverty, students with disabilities and English Language Learners), as well as those with declining enrollment. They also represent a major challenge for Wisconsin’s many small rural districts, where the loss of just a few students, coupled with increases in transportation costs, can have significant budget impacts. Increasingly, Wisconsin school leaders struggle with a funding system failing to keep pace with the growing and ever-changing educational needs of the students they serve.

The following data highlights some of the immediate problems with Wisconsin’s school finance system and illustrates the state’s shrinking commitment to its children:

29 http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html
1. Wisconsin’s national ranking in K-12 per-pupil spending has plummeted from 13\textsuperscript{th} highest in 2003-04 to 22\textsuperscript{nd} in 2013-14.\textsuperscript{30}

2. In 2003-04, Wisconsin spent $9,226 per pupil—11.3 percent more than the U.S. average ($8,287). In 2013-14, Wisconsin spent $11,186, or 1.6 percent more than the U.S. average\textsuperscript{31} ($11,009).

3. Researchers from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (Wistax) indicate that Wisconsin will likely fall below the national average in per-pupil spending in the 2015-16 U.S. Census Bureau data, if not before.\textsuperscript{32}

4. Wisconsin school aid as a percentage of the state general-purpose budget has declined from 43.1 percent in 2003-04 to 32.4 percent in 2016-17.\textsuperscript{33}

5. Wisconsin’s percentage of all school districts experiencing declining enrollment has hovered around the 60 percent mark for a decade, with 63.2 percent of districts facing declining enrollment in 2015-16. This compares to just 29.8 percent of districts that were in declining enrollment in 1997-98.\textsuperscript{34}

Guiding Principles:
Developing and implementing the “perfect” school finance system has proven to be an elusive endeavor, and we do not proclaim that we have a “magic bullet” to fix the problem. We do believe that the following non-negotiable, student-centered principles should guide our efforts at school finance reform in Wisconsin. A high-quality, effective school finance system, designed to foster improvements in student achievement for all Wisconsin school children, must do the following:

- Be sustainable to afford all children continued access to high-quality instructional programming.
- Recognize and address the unique and extraordinary needs of students in poverty, Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and students with disabilities.


\textsuperscript{31} Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. FOCUS No. 17, June 30, 2016


\textsuperscript{33} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. K-12 School Aids as % of State General Fund Appropriations, FY 1996FY 2017.

\textsuperscript{34} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. School District Declining Enrollment, FY 1988-FY 2016.
• Recognize and address the unique needs of students in different regions of the state. We simply cannot tolerate disparities in instructional resources and programming based on zip codes.
• Provide equitable access to instructional technology, 21st century curriculum and well-prepared, high-quality teachers and leaders.

Key Research Findings:
• Research on funding fairness historically centers on two main components: 1) factors associated with student needs, including special education, ELL and the social context, and 2) those related to regional differences in costs due to economies of scale, teacher costs and other factors. Although a general understanding exists that school funding ought to “strive to improve equity and adequacy of student outcomes,” many state funding formulas fail to accomplish this—often because of an over-reliance of local property taxes.
• Many low-income schools are challenged by inequitable access to teaching quality and financial resources. According to a 2011 U.S. Department of Education report, more than 40 percent of Title I schools “spent less state and local money on teachers and other personnel than schools that don’t receive Title I money at the same grade level in the same district.”
• School finance adequacy is one prominent area of focus in school finance policy. Odden et al., in their work on school finance, define adequacy “as providing a level of resources to schools that will enable them to make substantial improvements in student performance [...] as progression toward ensuring that all, or almost all, students meet their state’s performance standards in the long term.” To arrive at such an adequacy number, they use an evidence-based method that helps determine the funding needed to cover effective school strategies and related staffing. Staffing and resource costs are then aggregated for teachers, guidance, general resources, materials and other inputs.
• In a prior study of funding Wisconsin schools adequately, Odden et al. make numerous recommendations with related cost estimates, concluding that total K12 spending would have to increase by 9.2 percent to achieve adequacy. Recommendations from the Wisconsin adequacy study included additional per

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pupil support for high-needs students, as well as resources to support tutoring, extended day programming, additional instructional planning time and summer school. Odden et al. 37 summarize 10 strategies for improving performance, including analyzing and becoming more familiar with student data, setting higher goals, reviewing effective curricula and instruction, investing in teacher training and development, providing extra help for struggling students, creating smaller classrooms, restructuring school days and instructional time, providing strong leadership that fosters professional school cultures and bringing external professional knowledge into schools.

Implications:
Although international comparisons suggest that higher-spending nations do not necessarily correlate to high student achievement, funding inequities hinder the ability of high-poverty districts to provide an adequate education and contribute to larger societal inequalities. According to the Wisconsin school finance adequacy report by Odden et al. 38, “These findings suggest that equity issues should always be included in school finance analyses, and that variation in both student needs and the purchasing power of the education dollar should be recognized in the school finance system. Otherwise, conclusions about equity and undoubtedly adequacy could be incorrect. Further, these issues need to be centrally involved in an adequacy analysis.”

**WHY SEEK ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT?**

Recommendations for additional investment in public schools and public school children appear in this and in other sections of this report. Why is that the case?

The argument could be made that, since 2011, allowable revenue growth under revenue limits and per-pupil categorical aid combined have not kept pace with the rate of inflation or school districts’ fixed cost increases (i.e., utilities, transportation and infrastructure). That is a significant concern, but it is not the primary reason for seeking increased resources from the state. Simply put, we need to place our public school finance system on a more sustainable path to improve academic achievement for all children and close achievement gaps. The economic vitality of every Wisconsin community depends upon it.

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38 Odden et al, 2007
To meet that objective, research suggests we should make sure our students are ready to learn—when they first come to school and at every point thereafter—by investing in early childhood education, meeting the mental health needs of our students and expanding summer learning opportunities. We also need to invest in the recruitment, retention and development of a world-class teacher workforce, and to modernize our facilities to promote cutting-edge instruction. Finally, equity and fairness dictate that we must invest to provide high-quality educational opportunities for all our students, no matter their zip code or their educational needs.

**A MORE SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM**

One of the most significant problems in Wisconsin’s system of school finance is the systemic gap between allowable revenue growth under revenue caps and school districts’ fixed cost increases, as driven by state and federal requirements and community expectations. In such an unstable fiscal environment, many districts face extreme difficulties in repurposing budget funds and making new investments in innovation, continuous instructional improvement and a world-class educational staff. To provide much-needed fiscal stability and sustainability in our school finance system, Wisconsin must align allowable revenue growth with cost increases and the investments necessary for positive change.

Revenue limits were imposed on school districts in 1993-94 and have now been in place for 24 years. Many districts have argued over time that frugal “low-spending” districts were “locked in” at low revenue levels as revenue limits have been calculated on a per-pupil basis since their inception.39

To address this issue, the state established a per-pupil “low revenue” ceiling that allows districts to raise their per-pupil revenues to the ceiling without going to referendum. However, the low-revenue ceiling has been held to $9,100 per pupil since 2014-15 and currently assists few, if any, school districts.40

**Policy Recommendations:**

1. Increase the annual per-pupil adjustment under revenue caps by $200 per student in each year of the 2017-19 biennium, and by the annual percentage increase in the consumer price index (CPI) thereafter.

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2. Adopt State Superintendent Tony Evers' Fair Funding for Our Future Plan, which includes:
   • Distributing $1.003 billion in school levy and first dollar credits to school districts in the equalization aid formula
   • Distributing a minimum level of school aid for every student in every school district
   • Increasing the secondary cost ceiling from 90 percent to 100 percent of the prior year's average statewide shared cost
   • Additional formula “weighting” in the equalization aid formula for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch
   • A significant revenue limit per-pupil increase and a corresponding increase in general aid
   • A provision to “hold harmless” in the short term the school districts that lose resources under the plan

3. Increase the low revenue ceiling from the current $9,100 per pupil to $9,500 in 2017-18, and $9,900 in 2018-19.

**Students with High Needs**
Funding for students with high needs played a significant role in the debate over the constitutionality of the Wisconsin school finance system. In *Vincent v. Voight (2000)*, the State Supreme Court found the Wisconsin school finance system constitutional, so long as the legislature provided sufficient resources to ensure that all students are offered an equal opportunity for a sound, basic education. The court specifically enumerated three classes of students to which the state has a special obligation for ensuring equitable opportunities: economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities and English language learners. Today, maintaining flat high-needs funding while costs are rising to serve each of these enumerated classes of students challenges the abilities of local school districts to meet the court’s standard.

**Students in Poverty**
The student poverty rate continues to climb in Wisconsin. For the 2015-16 school year, 44.6 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals—up from 29.5
percent in the 2003-04 school year. Now, 104 of Wisconsin’s 422 school districts have 50 percent or more of their students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals.\textsuperscript{41}

The Achievement Gap Reduction (AGR) Program is one of the only state programs that targets funding for economically disadvantaged students.\textsuperscript{42} AGR replaced the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program in the 2015-16 school year. For many districts, existing SAGE contracts will remain in place until the end of their five-year contract period. The objective of AGR is to reduce participating schools’ achievement gap for lowincome students in math and reading. The program allows a school to meet its contract obligations by using one of three strategies: 1) one-to-one tutoring for students at risk of difficulty in math or reading, 2) instructional coaching for teachers and 3) small class sizes of 18:1 or 30:2 and professional development on small group discussion.\textsuperscript{43}

Under the program, schools receive a per-pupil allocation for each eligible low-income student in a participating grade (K-3). Currently, that allocation is $2,250 in statute, but the 2015-16 prorated amount was $2,171.68. AGR aid in 2016-17 totaled $109,184,500.\textsuperscript{44}

The AGR program serves 50,162 (K-3) of the state’s 363,534 (K-12) public school students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. These AGR students attend 421 elementary schools in 205 school districts. Despite this, Wisconsin has no comprehensive program that targets additional resources to raise achievement among economically disadvantaged students. A review of the data suggests that some elementary schools with more than 50 percent of their students eligible for free and reduced-price meals do not currently participate in the program.\textsuperscript{45}

Policy Recommendations:

1. The Fair Funding for Our Future Plan, as recommended in the previous section, includes additional formula “weighting” in the equalization aid formula for students

\textsuperscript{41} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Enrollment and Participation Data, October 2015.


\textsuperscript{44} Wisconsin Legislative Council. Act Memo. 2015 Wisconsin Act 53.

\textsuperscript{45} Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. State Support for K-12 Public Schools, FY 2015-FY 2017.
eligible for free and reduced-price meals. This option would require per-pupil revenue limit increases and increases in general aid to offset the effects of aid redistribution and provide districts with real spending authority.

2. Convene a study group to develop additional funding options that would support the needs of all economically disadvantaged students in Wisconsin.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Federal and state categorical aids for special education have not kept pace with rising costs. Categorical aid is the state’s primary source for recognizing the additional costs of educating students with disabilities. The state level of reimbursement fell below 30 percent in 2004-05, and fell again to 26.15 percent in 2016-17. As recently as 1993-94, the level of reimbursement was 44.6 percent. The special education categorical aid appropriation of $368,939,100 has been flat since 2008-09 and will continue at this level through at least 2017. Maintaining flat categorical aid funding, while special education costs continue to rise, effectively forces school districts to take more money from general aids and property taxes to pay for special education programs.46

Meeting the needs of pupils with low-incidence and high-cost special education requirements can be costly for school districts. To assist school districts in meeting these needs, the state created an additional appropriation for funding certain high-cost special education services. The appropriation consists of approximately $2.25 million annually of federal IDEA state discretionary funding and $3.5 million of state general purpose revenue (GPR). All costs (except administration) related to educating students with high-cost special education needs are “aidable” under the program. Costs reimbursed by IDEA flow-through dollars, Medicaid and state special education categorical aids are deducted. Reimbursement is then calculated at 70 percent of the amount (in excess of $30,000) that it costs to provide services to an individual pupil in the previous year.

The 2015 state budget reduced the portion of a student’s costs above $30,000 that was eligible for reimbursement from 90 percent to 70 percent. The biennial budget also included an additional $5 million for payments that will be available for claims submitted in the 2016-17 school year.47


Policy Recommendations:

1. Increase state special education categorical aid funding by 10 percent annually until the state level of reimbursement reaches 33 percent of prior year aidable costs.

2. Increase the portion of a high-cost special education student’s costs above $30,000 that is eligible for reimbursement from 70 percent to 100 percent. Fully fund the prior year’s aidable costs.

3. Make the special education categorical aid and high-cost special education categorical aid “sum sufficient” appropriations.

LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENTS

Wisconsin requires school districts to establish a bilingual-bicultural (BLBC) program if they meet the following thresholds of English Learner (EL) students from the same language group within a given school:

- 10 or more pupils in grades K-3
- 20 or more pupils in grades 4-8
- 20 or more pupils in grades 9-12

The state reimbursement rate for these BLBC programs has fallen from 32.2 percent of approved prior year costs in 1994-95 to about 8 percent of approved prior year cost in 2016-17. In addition to ELs attending districts that do not meet the above thresholds and ELs not covered by their districts BLBC program, the majority of ELs in Wisconsin do not have any targeted BLBC resources behind them to assist with the additional costs of educating these students to English proficiency. It is also reasonable to assume that, absent sufficient BLBC categorical aid, most district BLBC expenditures are being funded from general aids and property taxes.48

Policy Recommendations:

1. The legislature should double the current $8.59 million annual appropriation for BLBC Programs. Also, it should create a new categorical aid appropriation of approximately $2.2 million annually to award up to $100 per EL pupil to districts that have EL populations that do not currently qualify for BLBC categorical aid.

2. DPI should convene a study group to restructure BLBC program requirements and Wisconsin’s approach to educating EL students in general. The study group should

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also make recommendations for restructuring Wisconsin’s BLBC categorical aid program to support the additional education costs of every EL student in the state.

**Pupil Transportation**

Geographically large, sparsely populated rural school districts that transport students significant distances have been hardest hit by increasing transportation costs. These costs vary widely among school districts, from slightly less than $100 per pupil in some districts to more than $1,800 per pupil in others.⁴⁹

Under current law, school districts are required to provide transportation services to public and private school students enrolled in regular education programs if those students reside more than two miles from the nearest public school they are entitled to attend. State pupil transportation categorical aid is based on a flat annual amount per transported pupil. In the last two state budgets, the reimbursement rate for the farthest travel distance was increased from $220 per pupil to $300 per pupil, without increasing categorical aid funding. Payments are based on the distance a pupil travels to school from home.⁵⁰

Total school district transportation costs for transporting students to and from school are approximately $358 million annually. Thus, the state pupil transportation aid appropriation ($23,954,000 annually) reimburses only about 6.7 percent of actual transportation costs. Even with the infusion of $7.5 million annually for high-cost transportation funding in 2015-16, state reimbursement is still less than 9 percent of actual school transportation costs.⁵¹

In 2015-16, the Department of Public Instruction distributed $7.5 million to 128 school districts for high-cost transportation categorical aid. Districts are eligible for this aid if their transportation costs exceed 150 percent of the statewide average cost per member, and if their student membership is 50 students or fewer per square mile. During the 2015-16 school year, Wisconsin districts submitted $12.4 million in eligible costs, resulting in the new categorical aid funding being prorated at about 60 percent. The obvious policy implication

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⁴⁹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2017-19 State Budget Request.
⁵⁰ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2017-19 State Budget Request.
⁵¹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Email from Assistant State Superintendent Brian Pahnke, August 11, 2016.
here is that while this new infusion of funding for student transportation was extremely helpful, it was still inadequate toward covering actual costs districts incur each year.52

Policy Recommendations:

1. Increase funding for the pupil transportation aid appropriation by 10 percent annually until the state level of reimbursement reaches 33 percent of prior year aidable costs.

2. Increase funding for the high-cost transportation categorical aid to cover 100 percent of the prior year’s aidable costs. Create a second tier of support under this appropriation for districts with per-pupil transportation costs between 125 percent and 150 percent of the state average.

3. Make the pupil transportation aid and high-cost transportation aid appropriations “sum sufficient.”

4. Convene a study group to explore: 1) alternatives to our current method of distributing transportation aid to school districts, and 2) strategies for districts to reduce school transportation costs.

E. STANDARDS, ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Over the past 20 years, Wisconsin has developed and adopted academic content standards in more than 25 different content areas, including the four core areas of English, mathematics, science and social studies. These efforts have also covered the career and technical education fields, world languages, the arts and health and physical education and many others.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction adopts model standards in an academic area as a guide for school districts to use in planning and adopting curriculum aligned to clear,

52 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2016) News Release: 128 School Districts Qualify for High Cost Transportation Aid, July 12, 2016.)
concise and rigorous expectations for what students are expected to know and be able to do at regular intervals during their K-12 education. In large-scale assessment areas, such as mathematics and reading, the standards the DPI adopted also provide a roadmap for districts for what to expect of that assessment, as state and federal law require the state to adopt standards in these areas to align state-mandated assessments to those standards.

Although the DPI adopts model standards, school districts have always had the local control to adopt the state standards—or to adapt, modify and create new standards that meet their needs. They also retain control over how to best design a curriculum that aligns to state approved content standards. Local control over standards, instructional methods and practices, curriculum and textbooks, is a valuable hallmark of public education in Wisconsin, and one that should be preserved.

Wisconsin students, parents and teachers are best served by having a transparent, thoughtful and timely state process for standards adoption and revision. Furthermore, the state should move ahead with greatly needed revisions to its science and social studies standards, which have not been revised since 1998.

**ASSESSMENT**

Assessments of student learning, which are aligned to content standards and provide an understanding for what students know and can do in relation to established content standards, serve an important purpose in education. They provide feedback to the learner, diagnostic information to the educator and actionable information to parents, schools and future employers and institutions of higher education. However, no single assessment can fulfill all these goals. Specifically, formative assessments used for differentiating instruction, student goal setting and immediate feedback have been shown to have a strong, positive impact on student learning.

When reported in the aggregate, assessment data is also used to provide the public with information on learning in schools. Finally, assessments provide a valuable means of tracking achievement gaps that too often exist between different student subgroups in Wisconsin, including white students and their non-white peers.

Although assessment serves an important purpose, it is subsidiary to the paramount goal of providing high-quality learning for all students. It must be incorporated in a manner that supports the larger school mission. Assessment practices need to be balanced, evidence based and properly aligned to the fundamental purposes of teaching and learning. The
development of school and educator capacity must be integral—and not an afterthought. Wisconsin’s assessment system should:

- Include a balance of formative, interim, and summative assessment forms
- Provide valid, timely and reliable information on the progress of all students
- Be relevant to teachers and students
- Be universally designed for the full diversity of learners in our schools
- Not excessively detract from instructional time
- Include robust professional development provided to educators to develop and use high-quality classroom assessments and interpret standardized assessments
- Provide support for teacher collaborative practices involving assessment

Assessment has become an increasingly central and visible component of state and federal policy initiatives in elementary and secondary education. In Wisconsin, the 1990s saw the introduction of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE), which assessed reading and mathematics, along with English Language Arts, science and social studies, at grades four, eight and ten.

The first decade of the 21st century brought additional assessments, with the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act requiring additional summative accountability assessments of reading and mathematics at grades three, five, six, and seven, and Response to Intervention (RtI) encouraging the increased use of standardized benchmark assessments as part of a universal screening system.

Now, in the second decade of the century, Wisconsin schools have experienced further expansion and turnover of mandated assessments. Common Core-aligned Smarter Balanced (Badger) assessments replaced the WKCE reading and mathematics assessments at grades 3-8 for one year in 2014-2015. The Badger Exam and WKCE were replaced by the Forward Exam in 2015-2016, and it appears that the Forward Exam will be a longer-term state assessment program that schools and other stakeholders can depend on for planning.

The ACT suite of Aspire at grades 9-10, ACT in grade 11 and WorkKeys in grade 11 were added to the state-mandated high school assessment program beginning in 2014-2015, with only the grade 10 WKCE in reading, language, mathematics, science and social studies being removed. In addition, the PALS early literacy screener was mandated as a benchmark assessment in grades 4K-2, beginning in 2012-2013. The early literacy screening mandate has been modified (beginning in 2016-2017) to allow for local selection of the assessment(s), instead of a single state-selected assessment. In addition, a civics exam requirement was
added for graduation effective for students graduating in 2016-2017 and later. This increase in standardized assessment has been accompanied by the introduction of new accountability systems for schools and educators that rely substantially on assessment data.

On the heels of these widespread changes in the state’s assessment and accountability systems, it is time for both a period of stability in state assessments and the continuation of an evidence-based dialogue around assessment and accountability policies to ensure that the state truly has a balanced assessment system. This dialogue should engage several topics, which include—but are not limited to—the following:

- Reviewing the current portfolio of mandated assessments for alignment, relevance, time, reporting and usefulness of results, as well as the frequency with which districts are choosing to augment state-mandated assessments with optional testing of their own (using products such as MAP and STAR).
- Reviewing intended and unintended consequences of using assessment for high stakes, including asking the question: “Are current policies and practices driving or inhibiting improved teaching and learning?”
- Examining opportunities for promoting innovative and authentic assessment practices across the curriculum that facilitate personalized learning and the demonstration of creativity, problem-solving and other higher-order skills.
- Recommending professional development for current and pre-service educators in assessment development and literacy, evidence-based assessment practices and evidence-based grading practices.
- Reviewing the resources and structures schools and educators need to effectively administer the mandated assessment program and use the results.
- Developing ethical guidance to educators around assessment practices.

For example, the WorkKeys assessment is mandated for all students in 11th grade. The assessment is used to measure workplace skills and help people build career pathways. However, the utility of the WorkKeys for students is limited both in terms of providing information to inform teaching and its use in the private sector to build career pathways.

Wisconsin students and communities would be better served by changing the WorkKeys from a mandated assessment for all students to an option for some students. This would conserve precious instructional time for students, and the state could reallocate the resources toward building on the Academic and Career Planning Process and Career and Technical Education Incentive grants. Grants from this program incentivize school districts to offer high-quality career and technical education programs that mitigate workforce
shortages in key industries and occupations. The grants reimburse up to $1,000 for each pupil in a school district earning an approved industry-recognized certification.

The enterprise should be consistent with our values as a state and should aspire to incorporate the best evidence-based practices in place nationally and internationally. Improving learning for all students should be the guiding principle.

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability systems in high-performing entities, including frameworks for both content standards and assessments, vary widely. These range from an almost complete lack of standardized exams in Finland to a focus on high-stakes assessments in Massachusetts. A related gap exists across accountability systems, as schools in Massachusetts and Ontario link test scores and other student and school-level performance metrics to a school for decision-making purposes, while Finnish schools, which are largely controlled at a local level, do not distinguish and rate schools on standardized metrics.

Even with these drastically different approaches to accountability, a common thread is evident: the need for effective intervention and support to address areas of need and growth at both the school level (how we identify and support the lowest-performing schools) and the student level (how we identify and support the lowest-performing students). Although the means of identifying where development is needed vary between the systems, each tries to provide useful support rather than punishment or blame. For example, an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report from 2010 describes Ontario's system as one that assumes "that teachers are professionals who are trying to do the right thing, and that performance problems are much more likely to be a product of lack of knowledge than lack of motivation."

A specific issue related to assessment and accountability that has come up in recent years involves the small, but increasing, number of parents opting their children out of state mandated (and sometimes locally chosen) assessments. While opt-outs remain a relatively small percentage of the overall student population, their uneven distribution across the state—with large concentrations of opt-outs in certain schools—has the potential to distort state accountability systems, which are based heavily on state assessment results. By requiring districts to remind families of their right to opt out (per a recent change to state statutes), the incidence of opt-out seems likely to increase in coming years, to a point where the validity of accountability results for some schools may come into question.
Policy Recommendations:

• On the heels of three different state assessments in three years, it is time for a period of stability in state-mandated assessments to allow for comparability of results over time.

• Using the State Academic Standards and Assessment Review Council as an example, the State Superintendent should establish a process for reviewing the adoption and adaptation of state content standards and the assessments aligned to them. Considering content standards separately from assessments makes little sense given the close interconnection between the two.
  
  o One issue that a Standards and Assessment Review Council should consider is making the WorkKeys an optional—rather than required—state assessment, given the additional time it takes to administer and uncertainty over whether employers consider it a useful measure of students’ workforce readiness. Any dollars saved could be redirected toward the state’s Academic and Career Planning (ACP) process and/or Career and Technical Education (CTE) incentive grants to districts.
  
  o A second issue the council should consider is whether—and under which specific circumstances—a sampling approach (rather than assessing all students) could be used. For accountability purposes in districts and schools of sufficient size, for example, it could make sense to consider whether all students need to be assessed, or if sufficient information could be derived from a sample of students to minimize lost instructional time.

• State policy should promote full student participation in state assessments. While it is likely not practical to remove from state statutes the language that allows for optouts, we should not, as a state, promote opt-outs at the same time we develop and release state accountability results (Report Cards), which are based upon full participation of all students.

Given the rising concern over the time and resources dedicated to assessing student performance, districts and states should be strongly encouraged to complete an inventory of standardized assessments they administer to have clarity on key issues, such as why different assessments are administered (for state-mandated accountability versus progress monitoring of individual students, for example) and what the results are used for and by whom. Several useful examples of such assessment inventories exist, such as the Achieve Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts.53

53 see http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory