

May 7, 2021

An Open Letter to the Members of the Wisconsin State Legislature.

Thank you for your service and leadership to the people of the State of Wisconsin. We understand the importance of your work and the challenges you face in developing a biennial budget that addresses the needs and priorities of a diverse state. As a school district that receives a significant level of support from the State of Wisconsin, your decisions are critical to our operations and ability to meet the needs of our students and community.

We know a significant portion of state funding along with support from local property taxes fund our Pre-K through 12 education. As you begin the state budget process, we want to share with you our district's planning in meeting the needs of students and families. The pandemic has posed significant challenges for our efforts to meet our students' educational needs. Initially we made the abrupt switch to virtual instruction for the final quarter of the 2019-2020 school year and summer school. Racine Unified now has students learning in our schools with face-to-face instruction while giving parents an option to utilize remote learning for their children.

We feel fortunate to have received the one-time influx of dollars provided by the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding to support our efforts in meeting the needs of our students during the pandemic, and to help students recover from the interruption to their learning that was caused by the pandemic. The original funding we received last summer from ESSER I was spent on technology and internet access for students, PPE, health and safety supplies and protocol implementation, staff training and transportation cost increase due to safety protocol.

The remainder of our ESSER II funding and all of our ESSER III funding will be spent over the next three years on addressing pandemic-related learning loss. We will address this educational hardship through the implementation of evidence-based interventions and supports. Some examples of these interventions and supports are:

- Tutoring
- Alternative pathways to graduation
- Extended learning options
- Professional learning and additional licensing opportunities for staff
- Mental health supports

It must be noted that we are developing plans for our one-time ESSER funding as the Federal government intended it to be spent, which is to address the interruption to student learning caused by the global pandemic. However, the pandemic did not change the budget challenges we continue to face each year in our day-to-day operations. The challenges we face with inflationary increases to health insurance, transportation, utilities, technology, operational costs, along with our desire to provide minimal compensation increases for our employees, result in a budget that cannot be balanced without an annual increase in revenue.

We are in the process of developing our budget for the 2021-2022 school year and are looking forward to collaborating with legislators regarding priorities that will be impacted by the upcoming state biennial budget. There are four priority areas that are critical to our success in continuing to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student body.

1. **Revenue Limit:** A minimum increase to revenue limits by \$200 per pupil in the first year and \$204 in the second year of the biennium will allow us to maintain our current level of services and cover the inflationary increases described above. Our inflationary increases must be funded, which means if our revenue does not keep pace with inflation we will be forced to cut essential programming for our students.
2. **Special Education Funding:** Our district transfers almost \$34 million each year from our general fund to our special education fund to offset costs required to educate students with special education needs. These services are a legal requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The state categorical aid reimbursement we receive annually is simply not sufficient. Raising the state reimbursement rate for these required special education services to 50% by the end of the 2021-23 biennium will move our district closer to the true cost of educating our students with special education needs.
3. **Pandemic Related Pupil Count Mitigation:** It is very important to be allowed to replace our 2020-2021 pupil count with our 2019-2020 pupil count for revenue limit calculations as recommended in the initial Department of Public Instruction budget proposal. Unfortunately our enrollment decreased by over 1,000 students between the third Friday of September, 2019-2020, and the second Friday of January, 2020-2021. A contributing factor to this decrease is due in part to starting the school year virtually. The Racine Unified School District experienced the largest decline of students in 4- and 5-year-old-kindergarten. The decision to start the school year in a fully virtual model was made in the interest of the health and safety of our students, staff and our community and in cooperation with our local health departments. This pandemic-caused enrollment decline adds millions of dollars to our structural deficit and providing school districts with relief could provide long-term stability to our finances.
4. **Student Mental Health Support:** Our fourth priority area is student mental health. Our continual concern for the mental health of our children has most certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic and will continue in the years to come. We support the Governor's \$46.5 million proposed expansion of the School Mental Health Categorical Aid program. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the impact the state's 2021-2023 biennial budget will have on RUSD either via Zoom or in person.

We very much appreciate your partnership and are grateful for any assistance that you may be able to provide.

Sincerely,



Eric Gallien, Ph.D.  
Superintendent



Brian F. O'Connell  
Board President