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School Funding: It's about More than Money **by** **Senator Kathleen Vinehout**

“Public education in Wisconsin should provide high quality learning for ALL children no matter who they are or where they live,” Eau Claire School Board President Chris Hambuch-Boyle recently told me.

Chris and education leaders across the state read with interest details of the Governor’s plan for our next state budget. Governor Walker gave money to a number of new initiatives and reaped the praise of some education leaders.

The plan picks and chooses among various proposals advanced over the last few years. Some new programs are funded and some existing programs get more money. The plan is a compromise.

However – as with any political compromise – we should know what is not included and what is not being done.

We fund schools primarily through a school aid formula. Its purpose is to “equalize” resources in school districts across Wisconsin so regardless of where a child lives in the state, the opportunities for learning will be relatively equal.

The equalized aid formula is broken. A number of plans were proposed to fix the formula including ideas I supported. But the Governor’s new plan does nothing to fix the formula.

Rather, most of the new money in the Governor’s plan gives the same dollars to property-rich districts as to property-poor districts.

This is a new direction for our state.

Since 1973, governors have supported sending money for schools through the equalized aid formula. The policy of both parties was to see that every Wisconsin child had the same benefit of equal opportunity for a sound education.

Board President Hambuch-Boyle expressed concerns that the Governor's plan "Makes the inequity worse. Under the guise of 'here's some more money' he extends the inequity."

Consequently, children in property-rich schools have a better opportunity than children living in a property-poor district. School districts across state would be better served if the additional dollars recommended by the Governor were distributed through an improved equalized aid formula. Children would be better served if school leaders knew they could count on a steady partnership from the state.

President Hambuch-Boyle and many others across the state are working very hard to re-imagine public education for 21st Century students. Leaders in western Wisconsin encouraged legislators to learn about innovations. During a recent visit to an Eau Claire Middle School, I saw evidence of a new world in our public schools.

What do we want from our education system for our children? We want a place for our children to learn, to develop cognitive and social skills. We need our children to develop character and become responsible citizens. But we also want our children to find their passion and purpose.

Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith write in their book, *Most Likely to Succeed*, that students need to tackle the challenge of how to "leverage your passion and talents to make the world better."

Most Likely to Succeed is both a book and a documentary. Local education leaders recently invited legislators to view the film and talk about changes in our classrooms. The film explores innovation in education and the possibilities for the 21st century school. After viewing the film and visiting the ARCTIC Zone classroom at Eau Claire's Northstar Middle School, I am beginning to see the future of education.

"The world no longer cares how much you know, because Google knows everything. What the world cares about - what matters for learning, work and citizenship - is what you can *do* with what you know," write Wagner & Dintersmith. Students need to learn in groups by practicing problem solving and navigating group dynamics.

Critical thinking, communication, and collaborative problem solving are skills actively taught and evaluated as part of the school day in pioneering programs. New ways of teaching and learning means many old ways must change. Resources are needed. Funding stability is critical.

Wisconsin schools can innovate. We can provide high quality opportunities for our children that live in Beloit, Black River Falls, Brookfield or Bruce.

To get there, school leaders must be confident they don't have to worry about deep cuts in the next budget and we must fix the current school funding formula. This commitment is necessary to provide an equal opportunity education to every child.