

# Public Education and Wisconsin's Future

A strong system of public education is an investment in the future of Wisconsin. For over 150 years, Wisconsin's public schools have contributed to the state's economy and quality of life. While not perfect, they continue to do an outstanding job. In recent years, however, Wisconsin's schools have been threatened from two sources: those who seek to privatize education and those who support arbitrary and unrealistic revenue controls on local school budgets.

This paper begins by discussing the two fundamental purposes of public education: (1) giving students the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in our economy and (2) preparing them to live in a democratic society. The paper rejects privatization as a reform strategy and argues that the existing system of funding public education is intended to provide tax relief rather than improve education.

The paper concludes that the fundamental purposes of public education can best be achieved if we continue to support public schools and implement research-based reforms that will make a positive difference. This will ensure that every student is both a good citizen and one who is prepared for the workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Introduction

In 1995, the National Education Association reported on the relationship between economic development and spending for education. The authors of the report noted that the relationship is complex but that “Scholarly research has demonstrated a significant relationship between education spending and both future earnings (at the individual level) and overall economic growth (at the aggregate level (National Education Association, p. 34). This report also pointed out that an educated work force is one of the most important site selection factors, especially for growing companies. “. . . Moreover, in an Information Age economy that increasingly places a premium on skilled workers, gross underfunding of education in certain districts has serious consequences both for the life chances of disadvantaged students and the overall quality of life in the larger community” (p. 46). The popular media also recognize the importance of a quality system of public education. For example, in its 1998 ranking of the “best places to live” in the United States, *Money Magazine* identified the most important criteria in selecting a place to live by telephoning a random sample of adults throughout the United States (Gertner and Kirwin, 1998). Thirty-seven variables were identified; “good public education” was ranked fourth, topped only by clean water, low crime, and clean air.

Most of us recognize the importance of public schools and claim that we support high quality public education.<sup>1</sup> However, that support often is fragile, especially among members of the business community and elected officials, who frequently view the dollars spent on public education as yet another tax burden, rather than as an investment in our future. Wisconsin’s public school system currently is under attack from two sources: (1) those who deny the underlying premise of public education and seek to make education just another market commodity, and (2) those who nominally support its value but who have placed arbitrary and unrealistic revenue limits on public schools in order to control property taxes and to eliminate what is perceived to be waste and inefficiency. For 150 years, Wisconsin’s public schools have contributed to the vitality of our economy and to the state’s high quality of life. If this is to continue, we need to understand these two threats and identify ways to maintain and enhance what is widely recognized as an outstanding system of public education.<sup>2</sup>

In 1993, Benjamin Barber wrote an essay for *Harper's Magazine* in which he chastised Americans for doing so little to support public education. His comments appear equally timely in 2000.

"We have given up on the public schools," stated Barber, "because we have given up on the kids; and we have given up on the kids because we have given up on the future-perhaps because it is too multicolored or too dim or too hard. . . in giving up on the future, we have given up on democracy. Certainly there will be no liberty, no equality, no social justice without democracy, and there will be no democracy without citizens and schools that forge civic identity and democratic responsibility. . . When the polemics are spent and we are through hyperventilating about the crisis in education, there is only one question worth asking: are we serious? If we are, we can begin by honoring that old folk homily and put our money where for much too long our common American mouth has been. Our kids, for once, might be grateful” (Barber, p. 46).

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<sup>1</sup> Results of the 2000 annual poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools show that most Americans favor traditional public schools rather than choice or charter schools. Lowell C. Rose, the poll’s director, said “What this poll has consistently shown is the supposed decline in support for public schools is basically a myth” (Bowman, 2000). In addition, Phi Delta Kappa consistently has shown that parents give high grades to the public schools in their communities. Schools elsewhere tend to get significantly lower grades.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in one of his weekly columns written for Wisconsin’s newspapers, Wisconsin’s Governor (Thompson, 2000) wrote about Wisconsin’s “excellent schools” and cited examples of high quality: “Year after year, our children consistently outperform students in most other states on national assessments. Our children have led the nation for several years in a row in performance on ACT college admissions tests. . . Wisconsin shines again in an analysis released in July of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests. Wisconsin is one of only a handful of states that received high rankings in all major areas of the study by the Rand Corporation.”

## **The Purposes of Public Education**

Any discussion of public education must begin with an understanding of its two fundamental purposes. First, it provides students with the academic knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in our society, and in doing so, prepares them for future employment. Often overlooked in these discussions is the recognition that public schools serve a second purpose. They are not merely places where the individual's or the society's economic needs are met, but they are the primary means by which we transmit our values, perspectives, knowledge, and skills to future generations. This latter purpose was at the heart of the 19th century common school movement, which began at a time when formal education was available only to a small elite.

The early advocates of universal public education believed that the community had the responsibility to educate all children so that they would become responsible citizens who were prepared to resist tyranny and live in a democratic society. They also believed that a national system of public schools would allow us to develop a common language, culture, and national identity; to help people become economically self-sufficient; and to enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives.<sup>3</sup> Public schools were seen as the great equalizer because they would become the foundation of a society based on hard work, knowledge, and skills. All children, it was felt, would have the opportunity to improve their lives and to contribute to our system of representative government.

And how have we done? In the 1830s, only about half of all children attended school, which, on average, was 78 days per year. Rural schooling was less formal than urban, with children coming and going in concert with the demands of agricultural production. By the 1870s, approximately 60 percent of children were receiving some schooling, and by 1898 the figure increased to over 70 percent. School building intensified so that between 1890-1914, a new high school was built somewhere in the United States each day. Yet, by 1900, only one in 10 students remained in school beyond age 14.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, over 80 percent of young adults in the United States hold a high school diploma, and more than 60 percent go on to some form of post-secondary education. In Wisconsin, our graduation rate is approximately 90%, and more than 70% of high school graduates continue their education beyond high school.

The near universal reach of public education in our society is a more recent development than many realize. In 1996, 87 percent of Americans aged 25-29 had a high school diploma, a staggering change from 1950, when only about one-third of Wisconsin's adults had a high school diploma or more. Likewise, in 1950, only 13% of Wisconsin's adults, aged 25 or more, had formal education beyond high school. By 1990, this figure had increased more than three-fold, to 42%.

## **The Threats to Public Education**

At the beginning of the 21st century, public education in Wisconsin faces two serious threats. First, there are those who seem willing to abandon public schools by diverting tax dollars, in the form of vouchers, to private schools. They do this based on the rationale that competition and the market will lead to improvements in public education.<sup>4</sup> The second threat, far more subtle, yet potentially more harmful, comes from those who believe that controls on school spending are necessary in order to control property taxes and to eliminate perceived waste and inefficiency. Each of these threats is discussed below.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more complete discussion of the common school movement, see Phi Delta Center on National Educational Policy, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see the Campaign for America's Children at the following internet site: <http://www.putparentsincharge.org/home.html>. Also see Kaplan (2000).

## Private School Vouchers

Are public schools still necessary? Some will argue that public schools are no longer needed, but the underlying reasons for their existence are as valid today as they were in the 19th century. The America of 2000 is more diverse than it has ever been, and public schools still are the best hope we have for developing a common sense of values and culture and creating a sense of national identity. Need we be reminded that violence and crime still affect this society, and that education remains the best treatment for these social ills? And it is certainly true that public education is the best hope for many who seek to improve their economic lives.

There always have been critics of public education, but with few exceptions, most have decried specific features of public education, while still supporting the institution as a whole. We now are at a point where many openly advocate abandoning public education and replacing it with a privatized, voucher-driven system. Proponents of this action, perhaps without knowing it, are advocating a return to 1800 when education was split between "petty schools" for the masses and grammar schools and private academies for the children of parents who could afford them.

Elam (1996) has suggested that the lack of understanding and knowledge of education by the nation's adults has been exploited by those seeking to promote their own agendas. Perhaps as a consequence, critics of public education have been able to use selective data to show that we have a "failing" system of public schools, while ignoring data showing that national test scores have remained essentially stable for three decades.<sup>5</sup> Also keep in mind that during the past 30 years this country has educated a larger number of students who are more diverse and who have greater needs than ever before.

Wisconsin's students have done exceptionally well when compared with other states (and countries). For example, they have scored first, or been tied for first, on the ACT for eight consecutive years. Further, since 1990, Wisconsin's students have scored in the top handful of states on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in mathematics, reading, and science. Critics of public schools also ignore the solid body of research showing that conditions that affect the family are the strongest predictors of a child's academic success in school.<sup>6</sup> This is why most of the so-called failures of public education are found in schools with high levels of poverty (Kozol, 1991). Finally, these critics fail to acknowledge the good things occurring in schools that are not measured by paper and pencil tests (Bracey, 1998).

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has tested national samples of students, ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen. In general, the scores of students in reading and mathematics have been stable over the past two decades, while scores in science are down slightly. Berliner and Biddle (1995) note ". . . evidence from the NAEP also does not confirm the myth of a recent decline in American student achievement. Instead, it indicates a general pattern of stable achievement combined with modest growth in achievement among students from minority groups and 'less advantaged' backgrounds" (pp. 25-26).

<sup>6</sup> A 1994 study by the Rand Corporation found that the most important factor affecting student achievement is the parents' level of formal education--especially the education level of the child's mother. (Grissmer, et al., 1994). This finding suggests that parents who are well educated themselves are more likely to assume an active and ongoing role in the education of their children. Although true, this does not mean that there is little hope for children whose parents have had little formal education. It simply means that extra effort may be required to have all parents become more involved in the education of their children. A solid body of research tells us what must be done by parents and by schools to enhance family involvement in the education of children; the challenge is to find ways for teachers and parents to work together effectively to help all students succeed.

The voucher movement has appeal because the public good increasingly is defined and measured by the extent to which private interests extend the reach of the marketplace. Within a system of vouchers and choice, proponents argue that schools will treat parents and students as customers, and due to competition from private schools, public education itself will improve and prosper. Under a system of education driven by market forces, responsibility is given to the individual consumers (the parents), and the aggregate choices of parents or consumers determine which schools thrive and prosper, and which fail and disappear. When things go wrong, as they certainly will, there is the justification that the market was responsible, not those who promoted the policy itself.

Individualism, the promise of individual freedom and personal happiness, has been a central tenet of the American dream and is fundamental in American society. As a value, “individualism” has and will continue to make our society more productive. However, individualism, like most other things, can be taken too far and may further isolate Americans from each other and undermine our capacity to live in a pluralistic and complex world. This tension, between an America where individuals are perceived as creating the good economic life for themselves and an America where community matters, is at the heart of the debate about private school choice.

The nation’s voucher experiments, so far restricted to a limited number of locations, have demonstrated little or no significant effect on improved student learning.<sup>7</sup> Yet, vouchers have the potential, if expanded, to cause great harm to the entire system of public education in the United States by further undermining public confidence and by taking scarce resources from the public schools, which serve the vast majority of students. They also will attract children whose parents are some of the most highly involved and supportive of education. Perhaps the greatest danger is the potential to further segregate this society along racial, ethnic, religious, and class lines. Studies of choice in Great Britain have shown that middle class parents base decisions about which schools to attend mostly on social class and race, at the expense of equity, fairness, and overall social justice (Gerwitz, 1995). In this sense, a system of voucher schools may simply recreate the very problems that the common school movement sought to overcome.

### **Inadequate Funding**

In addition to those who seek to privatize education, we have those in Wisconsin who feel that the funding of public education through the property tax is so unfair and onerous that it needs to be controlled by the state government. They do not believe that controls on spending will harm schools, perhaps because they are convinced that there is waste and inefficiency that must be eliminated. To control school costs and reduce property taxes, Wisconsin Act 16, passed in 1993, capped the amount of revenue that school districts could raise from one year to the next. For example, during the 1993-94 school year, the annual increase was limited to \$190 per student. These figures were to be adjusted for inflation; however, in 1995, the original legislation was changed, and a fixed dollar amount is legislated annually. The revenue controls were made permanent that year, and the state also committed to fund two-thirds of the costs of public education statewide.

### **The Effects of the Revenue Caps**

What has been the effect of this 1993 legislation? Certainly, it has slowed the growth in property taxes for schools, but the consequences for public schools in this state have been anything but positive. Research over the past seven years by the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) and the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) has shown that the revenue caps have had a negative effect on nearly

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<sup>7</sup> There is controversy regarding the impact of voucher programs on student achievement. Recently, Molnar and Achilles (October 25, 2000) summarized what is known about the effects of choice programs on student achievement. They report that the evidence is inconclusive. Likewise, analysis of test data from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program over the first five years showed that performance of voucher children was about equal to students who remained in Milwaukee Public Schools (Witte, 1995).

all programs and services offered in almost every school district.<sup>8</sup> The results for 1999-2000 indicate that public education in Wisconsin is undergoing a funding crisis that threatens its very quality. This is not unexpected because districts are experiencing the cumulative effects of seven consecutive years of tight budgets and cost-saving actions.

As in previous years, superintendents who participated in the 1999-2000 study were asked whether their district made cuts in any of 24 program or service areas. They also were asked about the effects of these cuts. More than 60% of superintendents reported making cuts in eight areas:

- delaying building maintenance or improvement projects (66%);
- spending less for maintenance of buildings and grounds (68%);
- spending less for improvements of buildings and grounds (70%);
- delaying/reducing purchase of textbooks, curricular materials (62%);
- limiting purchase of consumable supplies, such as paper (62%);
- increasing administrator workload (63%);
- delaying/reducing purchase of computers and other technology (67%); and
- offering fewer staff development opportunities for teachers (60%).

For these eight, an average of 71% of superintendents said the effects of these cuts were "negative."

In addition to the above, 42% of districts laid off teachers during the last school year, 38% reduced counseling and similar services, 45% made reductions in programs for students who are at risk, 53% reduced programs for gifted and talented students, and 53% used their fund balance to support the district's budget. This last action threatens the very solvency of some school districts.

In previous studies, districts with declining enrollments have reported more cost-cutting actions than districts with increasing or stable student populations. Superintendents from declining enrollment districts also have been more critical of the revenue caps than superintendents from districts in which the student population was stable or increasing.

The effects of the revenue caps are likely to be even more damaging in future years because nearly one-half of superintendents surveyed in 2000 say that they expect their student population to decline over the next four to five years.<sup>9</sup> For these districts the decline is expected to be in the range of five to seven percent.<sup>10</sup>

Superintendents also recognize the negative effect that the caps have had on the overall quality of education in their district. In answer to a question asking about these effects over the past seven years, 62% said the effects have been "negative" or "very negative." Only three persons out of 276 (1%) said the effects were "positive."

Educating students with special needs remains a particularly difficult problem financially. Public schools are required to educate all students, including those with special needs. The revenue caps make it especially difficult for districts to meet the needs of these students because they cost more to educate and because their numbers are increasing.<sup>11</sup> Superintendents long have recognized this problem, and in 1998-99 said that

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<sup>8</sup> Allen, (2000).

<sup>9</sup> The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance noted in its 1999 report that the decline in public school enrollment in 1998-99 was the beginning of a trend in falling enrollment not seen since the early 1970s.

<sup>10</sup> The mean is 7%; the median is 5%.

<sup>11</sup> Currently, approximately 12% of Wisconsin's public school students have special needs. Research by Parrish, Chambers, and Matsumoto (1994) provided relative cost ratios for three categories of K12-students: (1) special education, (2) compensatory (at-risk) education, and (3) Limited English Proficient. They determined that the cost to educate a student with special needs is, on average, 2.3 times the cost for a regular education student. For at-risk students and Limited English Proficient students the cost ratios are nearly identical (approximately 1.4 times as much to educate).

the revenue caps had resulted in cuts in programs and services that were extensive enough to be causing “conflicts” or “disagreements” between regular and special education teachers over the use of resources. In their written comments, many superintendents criticized the state and national governments for failing to adequately fund special needs programs as was promised originally.

In the current study, 80% of superintendents say they are serving a greater number of ESL (English as a Second Language), at-risk, and special needs students now than they did four or five years ago. Not surprisingly, when asked about the percent of their district's budget spent for ESL, special needs, and at-risk students, 81% of superintendents said the percent spent is "greater" than it was a few years ago.

Finally, between 30% and 40% of superintendents say that as a result of the revenue caps, they are having difficult problems attracting and keeping qualified teachers, administrators, support staff, and specialists. The revenue caps legislation was intended to be a temporary way of controlling property taxes. The impact of the legislation was to be evaluated after five years; instead, the caps were made permanent, and there has been no evaluation by the State of Wisconsin.

### **What Must Be Done to Maintain and Enhance Wisconsin’s Public Schools?**

If Wisconsin’s public schools are to contribute positively, as they have, to the state’s economy and quality of life, we need to act on three fronts:

**1. Address the way we fund schools.** The citizens of Wisconsin need to describe what we want students to know, what we want students to be able to do, and what we want them to be like. This requires that we go far beyond making lists of academic standards and testing students on these standards. We also need to provide the resources that are adequate to achieve these goals and empower teachers and administrators to get the job done. The current system of educational funding is not working. Wisconsin’s school superintendents are telling us that our school districts are declining in quality and that they expect conditions to become even worse in future years. The revenue caps were never meant to be a long-term solution to controlling property taxes and certainly were not intended to improve education. We have sufficient resources to fund our schools; we need to look at creative ways to pay for them and then have the will to act.

Within the category of funding, special attention should be given to improving facilities and paying the costs of students with special needs.

\* Provide safe and high quality facilities for all students. In 1999, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction collected data about the physical condition and educational adequacy of nearly all public school buildings in this state. These data show that a small, yet significant number, of Wisconsin’s students attend schools that need many improvements. Schools in poor condition or those shown to be inadequate for quality programs and services should be repaired or replaced.<sup>12</sup> Based on what superintendents report, however, these improvements are not being made.

\* Provide for adequate funding to educate children with special needs. Currently, the State of Wisconsin pays about one-third of the total costs of educating children with special needs. State and federal laws require districts to provide services to meet the individual needs of each student, some of whom are far more expensive to educate than regular education students. Again and again, superintendents and teachers tell us that they are having more difficulty meeting the needs of the special education and regular education students. The State of Wisconsin must pay a greater share of the costs of educating students with special needs, or it should exempt these costs from the revenue caps.

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<sup>12</sup> This study can be found at the following internet address: <http://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/facsrvy/pdf/stwidsum.pdf>. The DPI estimates that it would cost approximately 1.5 billion dollars to bring all public schools in Wisconsin to good overall condition.

**2. Undertake an objective and thorough evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.** This is necessary because we know very little about how these publicly-funded schools are doing.<sup>13</sup> From 1990 to 1995, the Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction had the authority to evaluate the Milwaukee voucher program. These evaluations showed mixed results, but generally found that students in the voucher schools did about the same as those who remained in Milwaukee's public schools. After five years, the power to undertake an annual evaluation was taken from the state superintendent by the legislature and governor. Supporters of private school vouchers are some of the strongest critics of public education and invariably demand more and more accountability on the part of public schools. In Wisconsin (and elsewhere), they want tougher academic standards and high-stakes testing for students; state takeovers of poor-performing districts; more stringent criteria for teacher licensing (for example, teacher testing); pay linked to student performance; and many other measures. Yet many of these same people oppose legislation that requires even the most fundamental accountability for private schools receiving public dollars. By anyone's definition, we have imposed a double standard on publicly-funded voucher schools and traditional public schools in Wisconsin. The first step in improving accountability in voucher schools is to provide valid and reliable information to the public that is paying the bills.

**3. Implement reforms that experience and research have shown can make a difference in the lives of children.** These are educational reforms that have been proven successful. A partial list follows:

\* **Adopt smaller class sizes, especially at the early grades.** Small class sizes allow teachers to provide more attention to individual students; use active, innovative teaching strategies; and establish critical student-adult relationships that support learning. Project STAR, a longitudinal study of the effects of class size on more than 6,500 K-3 students in Tennessee, showed significant improvements in learning for students in small classes (13-17 students) from inner city, suburban, and rural schools (Mosteller, 1995). Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program also has shown significant improvements for participating students in the lower grades (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/oea/sage>).<sup>14</sup>

\* **Promote smaller schools.** Smaller schools have been shown to have positive effects on students who attend small schools, especially for poor and minority youth. Students who attend large schools tend to have lower levels of achievement, less participation in school activities, more problems related to safety and discipline, and lower graduation rates.<sup>15</sup> While there is no single definition of "smallness," some research indicates that an effective size for an elementary school is in the range of 300-400 students and that 400-800 students is appropriate for a secondary school (Cotton, 1996). On the other hand, Deborah Meier and Ted Sizer of the Coalition of Essential Schools, believe that no secondary school should exceed 300 students (Cushman, 1997).

\* **Avoid tracking students.** Although tracking is widely used because it is thought to benefit children, research shows that it harms the children who are tracked into low-performing classes and subjects (Glickman, 1991; Kickbusch, 1999).

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<sup>13</sup> In the Milwaukee parental-choice program, schools are not required to employ certified teachers or to accept students with exceptional educational needs if significant adjustments to school programs or facilities are required. In addition, their students also are not required to participate in state-level testing programs. Once in the program, schools can continue to participate if they meet only one of four criteria: (1) 70 percent or more of the students must advance at least one grade level each year; (2) there must be an average attendance rate of 90 percent; (3) at least 80 percent of the students must demonstrate significant academic progress; or (4) at least 70 percent of parents must meet parent-involvement criteria established by each of the participating schools.

<sup>14</sup> STAR data from 1990-1994 also show that students who were originally in the smaller classes continued to perform better than students from regular classes in later years (Mosteller, 1995). There also is research showing that smaller class sizes at fourth grade have a direct positive effect on student learning. Among eighth graders, the relationship is somewhat more complex; however, reduced class sizes improve the social environment, leading to fewer discipline problems, which in turn improve student learning (Wenglinsky, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> There is a large body of research on the benefits of reduced school size: Cotton, 1966; Cushman, January, 1977; Fowler, 1992; Irmsher, July, 1997; Lee and Smith, 1966; Maeroff, 1998; and Rotherham, 1999.

\* **Avoid the use of grade retention.** Each year, five to seven percent of U.S. children are retained at grade level on the assumption that retention is helpful for those who are immature and/or failing to achieve. Students who are retained one grade level have only one chance in 50 of graduating from high school. Those who are retained twice have virtually no chance of graduating (Glickman, 1991). More recently, research from Chicago (Reynolds, Temple, and McCoy, 1997) indicates that grade retention is frequently harmful to scholastic development, particularly if it occurs in the early grades.<sup>16</sup> Those who support the concept of “no social promotion,” while well intentioned, may be doing more harm than good.

\* **Establish high, yet reasonable, expectations.** Research shows that high expectations by parents and teachers that are reasonable can have a significant and positive effect on student learning, simply because students who are expected to learn are more likely to do so. It has been shown, however, that teachers generally tend to have lower expectations for poor and minority children.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that teachers need staff development opportunities to help them meet the needs of all children.

\* **Recognize the limitations of standardized tests and use them to improve teaching and learning.** Critics of standardized achievement tests have argued that their extensive use, especially for high stakes purposes such as graduation and promotion, has a serious negative effect on school programs and ultimately on student learning (Kohn, 2000). For years, many have argued that standardized achievement tests using a multiple choice format are not effective in measuring the kinds of skills and knowledge that parents and educators deem most important, including problem solving, questioning skills, divergent thinking, collaborative work, communication skills, the ability to develop a product, or the ability to collect and use information. As the primary way we measure accountability, the strengths and weaknesses of standardized achievement tests need to be better understood. Above all, we do not need any more politicians who advocate tougher standards and high-stakes testing of children without providing adequate resources to help all children succeed, or worse, withhold resources from those most in need.

\* **Support the professional development needs of teachers.** Teachers need regular and high quality professional development programs to maintain and improve their teaching skills. Yet, 60% of superintendents say that as a result of the revenue caps they cut staff development opportunities during the 1999-2000 school year. The State of Wisconsin also must support and adequately fund the new rules for teacher licensure that are to go into effect in 2004. At the end of the 1999-2000 school year, more than two-thirds of the state’s school superintendents said that they did not have the resources to train and prepare staff for implementation of the new licensure rules, which require mentoring programs, release time, and training of professional development teams. The new rules have the potential to have a significant, positive effect on teacher quality, but only if they are fully supported.

\* **Initiate programs to enhance higher levels of parent involvement in the education of children.** One of the original eight national goals for education called for every school to work with parents to increase parental involvement and participation in the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. This goal was considered critical to successful school improvement because research shows that the family is the child’s first and most important teacher. Students do best when they are raised in homes characterized by supportive parents who stress the importance of education and who encourage and expect high academic achievement. Schools and the community at large need to do more to encourage parents to become involved in the education of their

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<sup>16</sup> Retention is said to fail for three reasons: (1) the decision to retain frequently is made for nonacademic reasons. Boys, minorities, low-income children, and children demonstrating poor social adjustment are more likely to be retained, even after considering academic performance; (2) children who are retained do not do better academically after they repeat a grade. Over time these students fall further and further behind; and (3) grade retention may have the unintended consequence of contributing to a higher dropout rate.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see the following: Gaines and Davis, 1990; Tomlinson and Cross, 1991; and Teacher Survey Cites Students’ Lack of Readiness, 1992.

children because we know that parent and family involvement in education are the keys to the academic success of every child. (Patrikakou and Weissberg ,1999; Steinberg and Dornbusch, ,1996).

**\* Adopt policies to attract and keep qualified teachers, administrators, and other professional staff.** In January, 2000, Linda Darling-Hammond published a report in which she summarized the relationship between state levels of teacher quality and student achievement levels. Overall, she concludes that high standards in such areas as teacher licensing, teacher preparation, and continuing professional development have a significant and positive effect on student achievement, as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress tests. On several occasions, she notes that Wisconsin's high quality teaching force is a significant factor in explaining why Wisconsin's students do well on these tests.

The average beginning salary for a teacher in Wisconsin in 1999-2000 was slightly above \$26,000, compared with \$7,070 in 1970. In actual purchasing power, beginning teachers earn less today than they did 30 years ago. Over the next decade it is estimated that approximately two million new teachers will be needed in the United States. In our rhetoric, we say that we want the very best to go into teaching, but this will not occur as long as we continue to pay them so little, provide them with inadequate resources, and blame them for so many of the problems that schools are having (while ignoring the fact that our schools mirror the conditions in our society). In January, 2000, *Education Week* noted that Wisconsin's teachers earned, on average, \$10,000 less than workers in Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree (Wilson, 2000). *Education Week* also noted that teachers with a master's degree earned \$17,250 less than other workers with the same degree. These discrepancies in pay are compounded by the fact that teachers in Wisconsin are the only group of workers in the nation to have their pay increases capped by law. We may claim that we want quality teachers, but we will never achieve this goal until we address the problems of low pay, difficult working conditions, and poor treatment.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Inadequate funding and vouchers threaten the quality of public education in Wisconsin. Wisconsin's public schools are a valuable asset that serve the needs of approximately 84% of our children and have made a positive contribution to this state's strong economy and high quality of life. Public education in Wisconsin is not perfect; it never has been. However, rather than abandoning our schools by turning to vouchers or imposing unreasonable revenue controls, we should treat them as one of our most valuable and attractive assets and do what is necessary to support and improve them. They are an investment in Wisconsin's future. Schools often are told that they can learn much from business. There is some truth to this argument even though their purposes are dramatically different. Businesses that do not invest in research and development, fail to provide adequate training for their workers, fail to offer competitive wages, offer poor working conditions, or fail to improve and maintain their infrastructure are not likely to thrive. These same lessons apply to schools.

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