

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA) is a public school advocacy organization of school district leaders who represent over 225,000 Wisconsin students in 30 school districts in the Milwaukee region. We are a nonpartisan voice for student success, school growth and economic vitality through research, advocacy, public policy and effective communications.

The landscape of publically funded K-12 education policy is changing rapidly; some of the changes are healthy and promote a stronger and more effective learning experience. Still, we find some changes are politically driven, ideologically-based and fail to focus on developing more effective schools and school districts. This white paper provides an outline of priorities for policy-makers emphasizing equitable requirements for all schools and school services receiving public funds.

Members of the SWSA believe in equal educational opportunity, and feel that measures of accountability should be equal for all publicly funded institutions. In “leveling the playing field,” three important principles should be followed:

- * Accountability
- * Transparency
- * Provision of a moral and legal framework that serves all students

Public education in Wisconsin is evolving rapidly in the areas of instruction, policy, technology, assessment, and funding. SWSA members welcome many of these changes and aim to provide leadership in their application. In doing so, members are guided in their work by these three principles and by the Wisconsin Constitution, which requires the legislature to ensure that schools, “shall be as nearly uniform as practicable” and that they “be free and without charge for tuition to all children.”

Educational accountability for all schools receiving public funds

The public school landscape in Wisconsin is rich, varied, and growing. Traditional public schools, voucher schools, virtual schools, charter schools, and privatized school services are all receiving public funds. We believe policies should be put into place that provide for the same meaningful and purposeful measures of accountability and transparency to be applied to all forms of public education. We also believe that current levels of funding do not provide for the kind of education required by our students, and by extension, our state.

As such...

- All schools receiving public funds should be subject to the same accountability system, in exactly the same way.
- All schools receiving public funds should be held accountable based on the same outcomes, and should be provided with the same flexibility with regard to things such as instructional hours, the number of days of instruction, and the school calendar.

Effective and transparent measures of progress

Methods of measuring student achievement should involve multiple indicators and be carried out at multiple points in time. They should be built around personalized educational goals and allow for the measurement of student success at the state, district, school, and individual levels. The overall system must be transparent to parents and other community members in terms of what is measured, how, and when.

As such...

- Multiple measures should be used to track student progress over time.
- Accountability systems should measure student growth and be based on outcomes.
- Environmental factors that are correlated with achievement should be taken into account.
- The needs of children with exceptional talents should be addressed.
- Individual student instruction should be driven by accountability.

Moral and legal obligation to educate all Wisconsin students

Every child in this country, regardless of his or her background or any disability that they may have, should receive a free, high-quality public education, an idea that is uniquely American. In Wisconsin, we take this moral and ethical responsibility very seriously and should enact policies conducive to these ends.

Just as we must provide every student with a quality education, so too must we understand that the costs to do so may differ. It may require significantly more financial resources, for example, to educate children who live in poverty or students who require additional services due to disabilities. Every student can learn, but some cost more to teach.

As such...

- Our obligation to educate Wisconsin students should be applied to all children.
- We should live up to our obligation to the students who, because of their economic background or disability, have the most to gain from a world-class public education.
- All students must be provided with the programs and services that they need to succeed in school.
- The accountability system that will be used to report on the progress of Wisconsin schools should measure student growth based on outcomes and take into consideration environmental factors that are correlated with achievement. Moreover, the system should be useful in driving individual student instruction.

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