



School Funding Brief #3

Adequacy Makes Sense for Wisconsin's School Funding System

Adequacy means allocating resources not through the usual legislative horse-trading that divides up funds according to the relative power of competing interests. Instead, it demands, as [New York Court of Appeals Chief] Judge Kaye said, "determining the actual cost of providing a sound basic education"—teachers, materials, facilities—and creating the fiscal and governance structure to deliver it.

—Peter Schrag, author of Final Test: The Battle for Adequacy in America's Schools

Throughout Wisconsin, students face class sizes of forty, outdated textbooks, disappearing programs and classes, and shrinking school staffs. Educators are confronted with rising costs and unfunded mandates, coupled with starving budgets and insufficient state aid. Local taxpayers struggle to compensate with higher property taxes that still can't meet the needs of schools. Communities suffer the painful effects of a school funding system that doesn't fulfill its role.

Meanwhile, we place tough demands on our students and schools through tests and consequences based on performance. Educational goals are good, but how can we expect students to reach them without providing the necessary teachers and textbooks? Our responsibility is to educate children, but how can we get the job done without knowing how much it costs? How can we implement standards without any connection to the resources it takes to meet them?

"Adequacy" is a different way of funding public schools that makes this connection.

Q: What is Adequacy?

A: Adequacy is a nationally recognized, common-sense method for funding schools that links spending to educational goals and the resources needed to meet them. Adequacy asks: What components or *resources* do schools need in order to achieve their goals? How much do those resources cost?

- What resources do schools need in order to achieve their goals?**
- ✓ Small class sizes
 - ✓ Qualified, well-paid teachers
 - ✓ Ongoing teacher training
 - ✓ Up-to-date technology, textbooks, and materials
 - ✓ Programs for students with special needs
 - ✓ Broad curriculum
 - ✓ Early childhood education
 - ✓ Parent outreach staff

Q: How does Adequacy work?

A: Adequacy funds schools by looking at the expenses for facilities, staffing, equipment, and other items schools need to meet their academic goals. It starts with existing academic standards set by local school districts, the state, and the

federal government. Then it establishes the resources schools need to meet those standards. Finally, it calculates the cost of those resources.

Q: What's the difference between Adequacy and the current system?

A: The current system works backward by looking at the arbitrary amount of money lawmakers decide to

Adequacy...linking school funding to educational goals and the resources needed to meet them.

authorize. Then it divides up those dollars using a complicated formula that's based largely on spending levels from 1993 and local property wealth. Unlike Adequacy, the current system doesn't link school spending to the real needs of students.

Q: Why does Adequacy make sense?

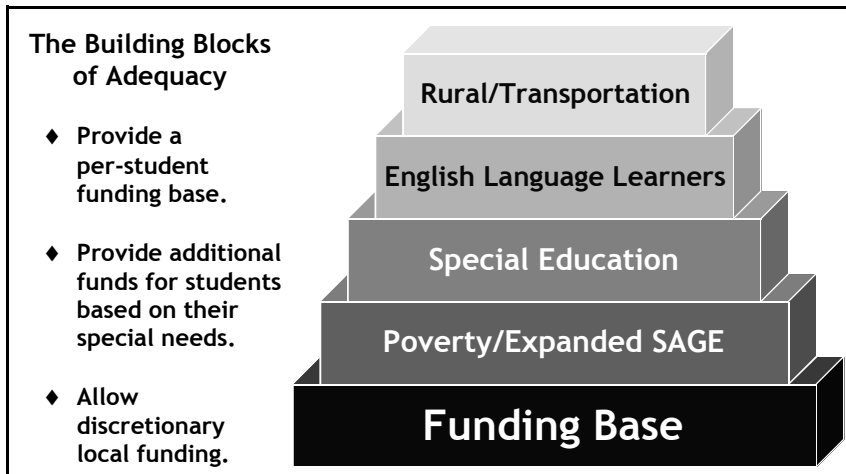
A: Imagine building a house. You decide what kind of house you want, figure out what materials and labor you need, and price it out. If you can afford it, you build it. If you can't, you go back to the drawing board and change your goals. Many areas of government operate this way, too. For example, they look at roads that need repairing, figure out the cost of the repair, and generate the money for it. Adequacy works the same way for education.

Q: Is Adequacy a brand-new idea?

A: Adequacy dates to the 1980s, when states began establishing academic standards for public schools. The idea was that schools needed money to pay for the resources needed to meet these new standards. In 1989, Kentucky became the first state to officially move toward Adequacy, and a number of states have followed since then. As author Peter Schrag states, Adequacy is "the major force, morally, legally, and politically" in moving states forward in providing appropriate resources for public schools. In its 2000 decision in the lawsuit *Vincent v. Voight*, the Wisconsin Supreme Court said it would look to Adequacy in the future to determine if the state's public school system is constitutionally sound.

Q: Why does Wisconsin need Adequacy?

A: The Wisconsin state constitution calls for every student to have an equal opportunity for a sound basic education. The state, along with local school districts, must do its part. Adequacy is a fair method for funding schools and guarantees all students an opportunity for success by meeting their needs, no matter where they live or their life circumstances. It goes



beyond "equity" by recognizing that some children face different challenges—poverty, limited English, or disabilities—and require extra support to meet educational goals.

Q: Does Adequacy limit my child's education?

A: Adequacy sets spending floors, not ceilings. It sets a funding base, ensures additional funds for students based on their special needs, and allows optional local spending. "Adequacy" is not the best word, but it's the word used in legal cases over the past decade. It doesn't mean "mediocre" or "just enough to get by." It means: *having enough resources so schools can do the job they're expected to do—provide all children an excellent education and an equal chance at successful academic achievement.*

Q: Is Adequacy too expensive?

A: To make adequacy affordable, a long-term plan must be adopted to gradually obtain the needed funds. We can't continue to support high standards and be expected to reach mandated academic goals, yet provide insufficient funds and no plan for reaching sufficient funding in the future. If education is going to remain a priority in Wisconsin, and Wisconsin is going to continue producing future leaders, workers, and citizens, then adequacy is not a luxury—it's necessary. Adequacy is an investment in the state's future, and it's what Wisconsin students deserve.

The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) is a statewide coalition of school districts, and teacher, parent, civic, and faith-based organizations, whose goal is comprehensive school funding reform using "adequacy" principles.

The WAES Wisconsin Adequacy Model ensures that resources are sufficient to guarantee that all children—regardless of where they live or their special circumstances—have the opportunity to meet Wisconsin's rigorous academic standards.