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Child Advocates React Favorably to Recommendations of Governor's Education Task Force

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families responded favorably today to a series of recommendations made by the Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence.

"We believe that many of the Task Force's recommendations will help improve the quality of education Wisconsin's children receive," said Charity Eleson, WCCF Executive Director. "In particular, we were very pleased to see a number of provisions related to strengthening and expanding access to early education, which we know plays a critical role in a child's life-long experiences."

The Task Force recommended that the state provide first year funding for four-year-old kindergarten, which would boost the ability of cash strapped districts to offer the program. According to a survey of school district administrators conducted late last year by WCCF, the lack of state aids in the first year of providing four-year-old kindergarten is one of the major deterrents to making this educational option available.

"The value of early educational experiences is well understood by Wisconsin voters," Eleson said. "They are also very supportive of expanding four-year-old kindergarten in the state, so we see this particular provision as a necessary step toward allowing school districts to meet the needs of children and the desires of parents in their communities."

The most recent polling data on public attitudes towards four-year-old kindergarten—based on a poll conducted last December on behalf of the Trust For Early Education—indicated that two-thirds of Wisconsin adults support providing funding to guarantee that all parents who want to enroll their children in pre-kindergarten can afford to do so. Currently, about 23 percent of the state's four-year-olds are enrolled in public kindergartens, with just over 40 percent of the school districts participating.

WCCF also supported the following recommendations made by the Task Force, some of which will help address the "performance gap" of children from poor and minority families:

- Targeted improvements in early education, such as incentives through the equalization formula for community-based collaborative four-year-old kindergarten (4K).
- Strengthening the state's SAGE program to reduce classroom size for the early elementary years.

(more)

- Strengthening the bilingual-bicultural categorical aid program and providing additional funds for bilingual-needs children where the enrollment thresholds are not met for categorical aids.
- Providing additional resources for schools with high-poverty students
- Strengthening the special education program.
- Providing additional resources for transportation needs of students
- Innovating new approaches to reducing truancy
- Improving after school programming

WCCF also commented on the Task Force recommendation to increase the sales tax rate from 5 percent to 6 percent and eliminate some of the current sales tax exemptions in order to provide property tax relief.

“We recognize the need to lessen the burden of the property tax, but we think it’s important that Governor Doyle and his administration proceed on this particular proposal with a careful study of its distributional effects,” said Eleson. “The sales tax generally hits people in lower income brackets the hardest, but it’s possible that using some of the new revenues for property tax relief combined with an expansion of the homestead tax credit, as the Task Force alludes to, could minimize those effects.”

WCCF encouraged policy makers to consider other revenue growth options along with the elimination of certain sales tax exemptions on services, including the elimination of the business property tax exemption for computer equipment, elimination of the capital gains income tax deduction, implementation of combined reporting of corporate income, and increasing the cigarette tax.

“In a recent poll of Wisconsin voters, we found strong support for changes in our tax code that would close corporate tax loopholes, eliminate certain professional service exemptions from the sales tax, and increasing the cigarette tax by 50 cents,” said Eleson. “Although voters are concerned about tax rates, the poll reveals public support for targeted options to raise revenue.”

The poll was conducted by The Feldman Group for the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy for a conference hosted by the two groups on “Financing Wisconsin’s Future”. It found that 80 percent of voters favored closing corporate tax loopholes; 68 percent favored taxing business goods and services; 60 percent favored taxing personal goods and services, such as health club dues; and 68 percent favored increasing the cigarette tax by 50 cents.

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