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An Initiative of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

**For immediate release
August 31, 2010**

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Wisconsin Schools Slip Toward Average in Spending and Staffing

A new analysis by the Wisconsin Budget Project finds that Wisconsin is no longer much ahead of the curve on school spending and staffing. Once a national leader in educational innovation and performance, Wisconsin's investment in K-12 education has slipped significantly relative to other states over the past decade, and it now ranks near the national average on many measures of support for public education.

According to the Budget Project analysis, per-pupil instructional spending in public and secondary schools grew by 7.6% (adjusted for inflation) in Wisconsin between 2000 and 2008 (the most recent year for which data is available), a rate less than half the national average of 17.9%. Wisconsin's rank in instructional spending per pupil dropped from 11th to 18th during that span. While Wisconsin continues to spend more per pupil than the national average, per-pupil spending here has been completely flat since 2003, while the national average has increased by 8.3%.

"The combination of revenue caps and the gradual erosion of support from state sources has put the squeeze on school districts, resulting in significant cuts at the local level," said research analyst Tamarine Cornelius, author of the report.

Wisconsin's decline relative to the nation as a whole can also be seen in teacher-student ratios. Between the 1999-2000 and 2008-09 school years, the number of students per teacher *increased* by 0.3 students in Wisconsin, while the national average *decreased* by 0.7 students.

While Wisconsin still has slightly fewer students per teacher than the national average, its rank on this important measure of educational quality has dropped steeply during the last four years for which data are available, from 21st to 29th.

"The trends in public school finance raise the question of whether Wisconsin should be content to become an average state in school spending and class size," said Jon Peacock, director of the Wisconsin Budget Project. "Policymakers and the public need to consider that question not only from the perspective of the well-being of Wisconsin's children, but also in terms of what sort of investment in education is necessary for our state's economic future."

The report is available online at:

http://www.wisconsinbudgetproject.org/schools_spending_staffing.pdf

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Supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Open Society Institute

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