“What’s Going Down In Our Schools?”

A Student-Led Report on How Budget Cuts Are Impacting Wisconsin High Schools

April 2005
What is Youth Reclaiming Our Communities?

Youth ROC is a statewide network of high school students, committed to building a youth movement around school funding reform so that all students can go to schools that have enough resources, well-kept facilities and adequate staff.

We are fighting to get more money and resources for public education by organizing in our individual schools and communities through unified and collective actions. Youth ROC is a program of the Institute for Wisconsin’s Future (IWF).

All students deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential through a quality education. While providing a quality education is the goal of all public schools, achieving this goal has become increasingly difficult because of spending caps and budget cuts. Over the last ten years there has been a huge conflict over how much money should be spent on public schools. During this time everyone from parents to legislators to teachers have weighed in, but students haven’t been a part of the conversation – Until Now!
In October 2004, Youth ROC organizers from the greater Milwaukee area met to develop a survey to determine if and how state budget cuts to education are impacting students’ high school experience. Organizers developed questions that would assess students’ experiences related to funding of various aspects of school, including instruction and support services, curriculum, extracurricular activities, facilities, and student fees. Students narrowed down and finalized questions after in-depth dialogues that compared their current school’s condition to what their ideal school would encompass.

Youth ROC has an established school club and is active in the six high schools across Wisconsin that participated in the survey, which include three urban, two suburban and one rural high school:

- **Urban:** Bradley Tech High School, Rufus King High School and Riverside University High School
- **Suburban:** Germantown High School and Shorewood High School
- **Rural:** Niagara High School

From November 2004 to February 2005 Youth ROC members distributed surveys to students during the lunch hour and through classroom presentations. A total of 1,013 surveys were collected from the six schools.

In February 2005 the survey data was entered and tabulated. During March 2005, students analyzed the results of the survey over the course of several meetings and authored this report on their findings.
Findings: Demographics

A total of 1,013 surveys were collected from the six participating high schools.

- Rufus King HS → 350 (35%) Respondents
- Germantown HS → 266 (26%) Respondents
- Niagara HS → 143 (14%) Respondents
- Riverside HS → 136 (13%) Respondents
- Bradley Tech HS → 67 (7%) Respondents
- Shorewood HS → 51 (5%) Respondents

Of the total respondents, 23% are Freshman, 22% are Sophomores, 26% are Juniors, and 29% are Seniors.

Lynde & Harry Bradley Technology and Trade High School

Bradley Tech High School is an urban high school located on the south side of Milwaukee. Approximately 1,500 students attend Tech, of whom 80% are students of color. Training students in the skilled trades is Tech’s mission.

Rufus King International Baccalaureate High School

Rufus King High is an urban high school located on the north side of Milwaukee. Approximately 1,400 students attend King, of whom 70% are students of color. An estimated 91% of its students participate in the Pre-International Baccalaureate and International Baccalaureate programs, which are rigorous programs that allow students to gain college credit while in high school.

Riverside University High School

Riverside High School is an urban high school located on the east side of Milwaukee. Approximately, 1,600 students attend Riverside, of whom 79% are students of color. Riverside is known for its Advanced Placement program and for its partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which allows students to attend UWM while in high school.

Germantown High School

Germantown High School is located in Germantown, and is approximately 15 miles northwest of Milwaukee. It serves a number of villages and towns including the Village of Germantown, the Town of Germantown, Jackson, Polk, Richfield, Hubertus, Colgate, and a part of Cedarburg. The school is comprised of approximately 1,300 students, of whom 94% are Caucasian.

Shorewood High School

Shorewood High School is located in the Village of Shorewood, a suburb near the northeast side of Milwaukee. Approximately 700 students attend Shorewood, of whom 73% are Caucasian. Shorewood has a reputation for its theatre program and it is continually ranked as one of the top schools in Wisconsin.

Niagara High School

Niagara High School is located in northeastern rural Wisconsin on the border of Michigan’s upper peninsula. It serves approximately 200 students, of whom 99% are Caucasian. Niagara is a close-knit community and is known for its high-achieving school.
Findings: Demographics of Total Respondents

Of the total students surveyed 59% are Female and 41% are Male.

Of the total students surveyed 53% are White and 47% are People of Color.
The survey results show the most important problems facing students are: large class sizes, poor facilities, high student fees, insufficient supplies, not enough course options, and lack of health services.*

When students were asked what the number one improvement needed at their school was, urban students stated smaller class sizes and student-to-teacher ratio, suburban students said facilities, and rural students answered quality curriculum and variety of classes.

The chart below shows the percentage of students who identified these problems as major issues in their school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Class Size Too Big</th>
<th>Facilities Not in Good Condition</th>
<th>Too Many Student Fees</th>
<th>Not Enough Supplies</th>
<th>Program Cuts</th>
<th>Lack of Health Services</th>
<th>Most Significant Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rufus King</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>Large Class Sizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>Poor Facilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Poor Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germantown</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Poor Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorewood</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>Poor Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niagara</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Inadequate Course Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Response</strong></td>
<td><strong>53%</strong></td>
<td><strong>53%</strong></td>
<td><strong>48%</strong></td>
<td><strong>66%</strong></td>
<td><strong>38%</strong></td>
<td><strong>51%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These results are composites of responses from multiple questions
Findings: Analysis of Top Issues

Class Size
Of the total number of students surveyed, 53% said that class sizes are too big. This number increases to 66% when asking students from urban high schools, who state that the student-to-teacher ratio needs the most improvement. A slightly lower number (51%) of suburban students state that class sizes are too big, while 91% of rural students do not see this as a problem.

Facilities
When asked what is the number one improvement needed, facilities ranked as the top issue, with 53% of students stating that facilities are not in good condition. When divided into type of facility, 56% of students report that bathrooms are not kept in good condition, and stated they are in need of the most improvement. When students in urban and suburban school districts rated the condition of their school's facilities, the responses were equivalent, with 55% of urban students and 53% of suburban students stating that facilities are not kept in good condition. This number modestly decreases to 39% when rural students were asked the same question.

Fees
Of the total students surveyed, 48% said that they are paying too many fees. In addition to the annual school fee that students are required to pay, 72% pay a fee to participate in sports and 31% pay to be involved in other extracurricular activities. Overall, 48% of students believe they are paying more fees than in previous years. Rural students pay significantly less in fees (26%) than urban (56%) and suburban (48%) students.

Supplies: Teacher
Students statewide (60%) said that teachers do not have the supplies they need. A total of 63% of suburban students stated that teachers are lacking supplies, compared to 60% of urban and 53% of rural students.

Supplies: Student
Of the students surveyed, a total of 72% said that they are required to purchase supplies for academic classes. This number increases to 78% when asking suburban students, compared to 72% of rural and 69% of urban students.

Program Cuts
Of the students surveyed, 38% state that there are fewer classes offered now than compared to previous years. This number significantly increases to 64% when asking rural students. The number of urban students (33%) and suburban students (38%) who said that there have been program cuts are comparable.

Lack of Health Services
When students were asked if their school had enough staff in health services, 51% answered no. A total of 63% of urban students stated that there are a lack of nurses in their school, compared to 27% of rural and 40% of suburban students.
Student Analysis

Large Class Sizes
Large class sizes are a problem at almost every school surveyed with the exception of Niagara High School where 83% of students said that class sizes were just right.

Although class size is a major issue in urban schools, our survey shows that suburban students are concerned as well. Nearly two-thirds of all the Milwaukee students surveyed and more than one-half of the students at Germantown feel that their class sizes are too large. As students, we are concerned about this because districts will have to cut more staff and increase class sizes next year due to budget cuts.

We need as many teachers as possible. Small class sizes allow teachers to focus more on student needs and provide more personal attention. All students deserve a learning environment that gives individualized attention, is free from distraction, and gives all students a chance to succeed!

Poor Facilities
Facilities are not being kept in good condition at four of the six schools surveyed. Students at Bradley Tech gave their school the poorest rating with 70% of students stating that facilities were either fair or poor. This is particularly upsetting because Bradley Tech is less than three years old, yet it was built without an auditorium, athletic field, swimming pool, running track, or band/music room. What’s worse is that Tech was built without walls separating the classrooms and the hallway, making it difficult for students to learn.

At Germantown HS, nearly 60% of students rated their facilities as less than good. The students at Shorewood High School are happy with their facilities; over 72% rated the facilities as Good or Excellent. At Riverside University HS, more than 70% of the students said that bathrooms are not kept in good condition.

Schools should work with students to identify a list of facilities that need improvement. As students, we deserve to go to school in an environment that is clean and makes us feel proud. Furthermore, we feel that students should be consulted before changes or additions are made to our schools, because we are the ones who know first hand if our facilities are working or not.

Student Voices

“The reason I love my school so much is the small classes. I get a lot of one-on-one attention from my teachers and if I don’t understand something someone is always available to help.”

Amanda Cheney, Niagara HS

“Budget cuts are forcing my school to cut three teachers next year, even though we already have more than 40 kids in some classes. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

Kendrick Harris– Riverside HS

“Not having walls creates a terrible learning environment. Everyday my 3rd block teacher has to stop teaching for 10 minutes because of the distraction caused by students going to lunch.”

Omayra Reyes– Tech HS

“It’s hard to believe my school cares about me when they make the band practice in a room that is so small it’s damaging our hearing.”

Kerry Brady– Germantown HS
Student Analysis

High Student Fees
Our survey shows that schools are assessing fees for almost every aspect of school life. Over 87% of urban and three-fourths of suburban students recognize paying an annual school fee. This number drops to about 30% for rural students. At some schools students who play more than one sport or participate in a number of activities can end up paying over $200 per year. Many students feel they are paying more in fees than in previous years. For example, two out of three of the students surveyed at Riverside HS feel this way. In addition to paying school fees, more than three-fourths of suburban students have had to fundraise to support their school clubs and activities, compared to more than two-thirds of urban, and more than 60% of rural students. Schools have been forced to slash their extracurricular activities and course elective budgets because of funding shortages, leaving students and their parents to pick up the slack. We know that when students participate in extracurricular activities their grades increase; they are less likely to get in trouble; and they take more pride in their school. These things are part of a quality education and school fees are a barrier to it.

Insufficient Supplies
Teachers not having the supplies they need to do a good job is hurting every district surveyed. What’s surprising is that this is an even larger problem in suburban districts than in urban and rural ones. A total of 79% of the students surveyed at Germantown have had to purchase supplies for class, compared to 75% of the students at Shorewood and 72% of the students at Niagara. Still in Milwaukee, more than 60% of students said that their teachers do not have the supplies they need. In Milwaukee, classes often lack basic materials such as textbooks. Furthermore, students recognize that this problem leads to teachers having to purchase supplies with their own money. The state has an obligation to provide supplies that will enhance our classroom experience. Our teachers must be given the resources needed to provide an environment that is conducive to learning. The State Constitution says that the state must provide students with a quality education and we feel that a quality education requires adequate school supplies.

Student Voices
“We pay a fee for everything, from supplies to school clubs to sports, and even with all the fees we still have to fundraise. The more you participate, the more fees you have to pay. It’s like we’re being penalized for being active in school.”
Ataushaafi Malik— Riverside HS

“I thought a public education was supposed to be free! Every year I have to spend more money to have a memorable high school experience.”
Symphony Swan— King HS

“Some of my teachers don’t even have textbooks for their classes. How am I supposed to study at home when I don’t have a book?”
Lana Jones— Rufus King HS

“I know for a fact my art teacher provides a lot of her own supplies and what the school does provide is sub-par.”
Jessie Behn— Germantown HS
Student Analysis

Program Cuts

Schools try not to make curriculum cuts when faced with budget deficits. The fact that many schools are now being forced to do just that shows that there is a huge problem in the school funding formula.

More than 84% of students at Shorewood HS and nearly two-thirds of the students at Niagara feel that they have fewer course options now than in previous years. Furthermore, a significant number of students at every school are not sure whether or not their opportunities are being affected by a lack of course options. Students and parents should be well informed of any possible cuts and given the opportunity to discuss their priorities.

We are very concerned about program cuts and the differences between the curriculum offered at our schools. If one school can offer dozens of Advanced Placement courses, while students at another school are struggling to keep chemistry, our educational system is separate and unequal. We want students at Riverside to have AP philosophy; we want students at Shorewood to have outstanding fine arts courses. These classes are part of a quality education that ALL students should have access to regardless of the district they live in.

Lack of Health Services

It’s no secret that most schools in Wisconsin do not have a full-time nurse on staff. Like librarians and custodians, nurses are seen as expendable in a budget crunch. However, the majority of students in both urban and suburban schools said that they do not have enough health services. Students feel that a part-time nurse is not enough. For example, 73% of students at Shorewood want more health services, even though they have a part-time nurse.

While some adults do not see a school nurse as important, students do. Having a full-time nurse is especially important in Milwaukee due to the high number of students without health insurance. This is highlighted by the fact that 63% of urban students stated that they have a lack of health services in their school. We feel that nurses offer a safe place for students to go and ask questions and get accurate answers on everything from developing a healthy diet and exercise to dealing with domestic violence.

Student Voices

“I was looking forward to taking music theory my senior year, but it was cut before I got the chance.”

Lauren Hutchins—Shorewood HS

“Niagara only has one foreign language teacher, and she instructs seven French classes a day ranging from eighth grade to high school French 4. At levels 3 and 4, the classes become merged. In one class period the teacher bounces back and forth between the levels. This make it hard to learn and focus on what is being taught.”

Jackie Hehn—Niagara HS

“We have a school nurse?”

Eric Upchurch Jr.–Tech HS

“Monday through Thursday the nurse leaves at 2:00 pm, in the middle of 6th hour. I have 7th hour gym, am I not supposed to get injured or sick on a Friday or after 2:00?”

Tyler Vaughn—Shorewood HS
**Top Issues**

We were surprised to learn that four of the six schools identified poor facilities as the top issue. Some students want their facilities to be more well-maintained, while others need simple amenities like soap and toilet paper in the bathrooms. Shorewood HS had to push back their school play because of a fire in the auditorium. The students want the auditorium to be fixed in a timely fashion. Germantown students cited the closing of their pool and the lack of an auditorium and band room as major problems. Students at Rufus King feel that large class sizes have to change, while students at Niagara want more course options.

Whatever the improvements needed, we feel that schools should engage students in identifying changes and begin a process for addressing them.

We also know that all of these problems are not the fault of our school board, teachers, or principals. They all stem from a lack of funding, and the solution is in Madison. We know that the people running our schools want to keep our facilities in great condition, provide us all with small classes, individualized attention, and offer a diverse curriculum, but funding shortages are making this a difficult task.

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**Student Voices**

“We need a better athletic field. We can’t even have home games because our field is in such terrible condition.”

*James Groce—Riverside HS*

“We need a variety of classes. We’re not just missing out on electives, but on fundamental core courses as well.”

*Jared Blaney—Niagara HS*

“Short of calling Oprah, there’s little we can do on our own about the facilities. We have an estimated $1.2 million worth of needed improvements. The community needs to realize that quality facilities benefit all of Germantown, not just the students.”

*Melissa Wiehr—Germantown HS*
The members of Youth ROC created this report to make the community aware of the present conditions in our schools. Wisconsin has a proud tradition of excellent public schools. However, the issues highlighted by our survey are threatening the quality of education and standards for which Wisconsin is known. We are the future; we hope you will make us your priority by joining us to find a solution to the problems our schools are facing. We demand a quality education and we’re ready to fight for it!

This report is the first step towards creating change in our schools and communities. When we started, we had disagreements about which schools deserved more resources and attention. People are always trying to pit urban, suburban, and rural schools against each other and we realize that we need to be united. We overcame our differences by working together. We now know that we all have the same goal—a quality education.

This is only the beginning of the conversation and we encourage parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators to engage students in all discussions and decisions that impact our education.

Our schools are being asked to do more with less resources and money. School districts cannot control how many students with disabilities they have or how much the cost of fuel increases. While we recognize that these factors force districts to make cuts, every year the budget cuts are made without consulting students; decisions about our future should never be made without knowing our priorities.

We demand that we be a part of the conversation and have our voices heard. We know that the solution doesn't lie in protesting the school board or cutting our budgets to the bone, but with our legislators in Madison. We need all of our leaders to put aside their political differences like we did, and work to find a long term solution to the school funding crisis. Never before have students joined forces across district, racial, and class lines. This is not a fad, it's a MOVEMENT!

We will not go away and our voices will only get stronger!

-- Youth Reclaiming Our Communities Organizing Team Members
Acknowledgements

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IWF was established in 1994 by a broad coalition of concerned citizens, labor organizations, academics, professionals, religious leaders, and advocacy groups.
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