For more than 50 years, the United States has claimed to provide equal public education to all students, regardless of background or identity. But in fact, as income and wealth inequality have become more brutal and entrenched, low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities have systematically and continuously been deprived of the resources that more privileged students take for granted. This fact sheet describes some of the sources of the underfunding of public schools, and policies that could finally achieve equity for our schools.

**Federal Underfunding of Public Schools**

In 1965, the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which sought to address the need for additional resources for schools in economically deprived communities. The legislation recommended that the federal government provide additional funding for low-income students, at a level up to 40% on top of average per-pupil state spending. That commitment, known as Title 1, has been underfunded every year.

If the federal Title 1 commitment had been met, Milwaukee would have had an additional $200 million to spend on low-income children in 2015 alone. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Milwaukee schools have been shortchanged $2 billion in federal Title 1 funds.¹

In 1975, Congress passed the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which requires schools to provide students with disabilities with the supports they need in school. IDEA assumes that on average, the cost of educating a child with disabilities is twice the cost of educating a non-disabled student, and Congress pledged that the federal government would pay up to 40 percent of this cost. That commitment was also never met.

If the federal IDEA commitment had been met, in 2015 alone, Milwaukee would have had an additional $35 million to spend on students with disabilities. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Milwaukee schools have been shortchanged $412 million in federal IDEA funds.²

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¹ US Department of Education Budget Service and US Census Bureau, and National Education Association.
² Ibid.
Investment in Police and Prisons Instead of Schools

Over the past few decades, spending on police and prisons has skyrocketed, along with harsh criminal penalties for minor offenses, the criminalization of normal teenage behavior, and punitive school discipline policies. In addition to the unjust incarceration of millions of people, this expansion of the police and prison industry has reduced resources for public education.

In Milwaukee, between 2005 and 2014, government spending was not distributed equally across funding areas:

- Spending on police protection increased by 9%[^3]
- Per-pupil spending instruction decreased by 18%^[^4]

Bad Actors

While Milwaukee public schools struggle, the wealthy and corporations have benefitted from tax subsidies and undermined public education through supporting school privatization.

- Milwaukee’s biggest charter school advocates include Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce President Timothy Sheehy, Northwestern Mutual CEO John Schlifske and executives: Maclovio Vega, Samantha Maldonado, Ralph Weber, Kamilah Williams-Kemp, Tim Gerend, Jason Schultz, Peter Richardson, David Ellis, Silver Spring Neighborhood Center, RW Baird, Leaders for a Better Community founder Sherwin Hughes, Black Alliance for Educational Option (defunct) founder Howard Fuller, R.W. Baird, Robert Raugh of Milwaukee College Prep and Patricia Hoben of Carmen Schools. In addition, Milwaukee’s voucher program siphon a quarter of a billion dollars from Milwaukee’s public schools every year.
- Wealthy commercial property owners who have benefitted from Tax Increment Financing (TIF) include Northwestern Mutual, to whom the city gave $73 million in TIF money to build a new office tower.

Make the Rich and Corporations Pay Their Fair Share

This is the wealthiest nation in the world—and among the most unequal—with the greatest concentration of wealth in the hands of the fewest people. Every year, decisions are made by political leaders that strip public funding from public education and send that money to further increase private wealth. Milwaukee is no exception. But there are several policies that could generate millions of dollars to achieve equity in Milwaukee public schools.

- Passing legislation to close the carried interest loophole would raise about $5.2 million in Wisconsin[^5]
- Repeal the manufacturing and agriculture tax credit that gives $22 million in credit to 11 individuals who make over 30 million

Our cities, states and federal government have the funds necessary to provide all students with an equitable and high-quality education, but they choose to spend resources on police and prisons, corporations and the wealthy. It is time to take those funds back and provide all children with the schools that they deserve.

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[^3]: US Census Data, Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances
[^4]: US Census Data, Annual Survey of School Finances
[^5]: See full report for methodology