

Senator Says I agree, Governor! Let's Make Public Schools "Whole"

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Monday, 25 May 2015 12:06 - Last Updated Monday, 25 May 2015 12:34

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/school-kids-s5.jpg>



Recent action taken by majority party members on the Joint Finance Committee on funding for public education provided limited additional revenue to public schools while opening the door for expansion of private vouchers. It will take dollars away from public schools.

ALMA, WI - "Our number one priority gotta to be make (sic) sure that we make K-12 schools, public education in the state, a priority to make sure they're held whole," said Governor Walker on April 23rd, as quoted by Wisconsin Radio Network.

I agree, Governor! Let's make public schools "whole."

In a recent late night session, the state's budget writing committee took up public school funding. Many advocates expected a turnaround in the governor's proposed funding for local schools. Instead folks got a big surprise: lots of changes asked for by private school lobbyists. Not so for public schools.

In a press release, State Superintendent Tony Evers described the actions this way:

- **For the first time ever, there is no increase in state imposed revenue limits** over the next two school years, while voucher and independent charter school payments are increased in each year.

- State general equalization aid to public schools **is cut in the first year** to pay for voucher expansion and increased independent charter school payments.

This leaves public schools with less state general aid than in 2010.

- **Continues the freeze on state special education aid for what will be the eighth consecutive year,** covering roughly a quarter of district special education costs while creating a new voucher program that drains funds from public schools.

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- **Essentially eliminates teacher licensing standards** by allowing public and private schools to hire anyone to teach, even those without a bachelor's degree, **planting Wisconsin at the bottom nationally**, below states with the lowest student achievement levels.

Republicans on the Joint Finance committee opened wide the spigot of state money flowing to private schools. Created in late night actions was a new statewide special education "voucher" program with \$12,000 per student leaving the local school district; permission for the multiplication of some privately-operated independent charter schools and statewide expansion of private vouchers for all students with a cap of 1% of the local district's enrollment in the first year and moving to unlimited expansion after several years. Money for this statewide subsidy would come from the local public schools.

In addition, to keep competitive sports programs, public schools would be required to accept private and home-schooled children into their sports programs and extracurricular activities and not charge these students any more than a public school student would be charged for sports or extracurricular activities. This rule would essentially ask public school parents to underwrite the cost of these private school children coming back into the public schools to partake of after-school activities – as the school would receive no additional fees from the state for these students.

Republican Finance Committee members also voted to create a new private school take-over of Milwaukee public schools. This system would leave no public school alternative in many Milwaukee neighborhoods. Many residents are concerned this action violates the state's constitution to require an equal and public education for all children.

Left far behind was the governor's promise to make sure public schools are "held whole."

Ironically the day before, the governor spoke to a pro-private school group in New Orleans - the American Federation for Children - according to a Wisconsin State Journal report.

Had the governor been here, I would have told him that to make schools "whole" means returning the money cut from public schools.

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The cumulative cut to public schools since 2011 – the first Governor Walker budget – is nearly \$1.7 billion. These cuts happened at a time when Wisconsin collected and spent a cumulative increase in revenue of nearly \$13.8 billion.

These staggering cuts – at a time when the state was spending much more – drained the savings of school districts, delayed maintenance, caused pay cuts and freezes to staff and left children with fewer resources.

As state school aid dropped and districts used up all available budget cutting measures, many districts were forced to go to referendum. The Wisconsin Taxpayer recently reported 78% of referenda passed in April of 2015 – a significantly higher rate than prior years. Property taxpayers, committed to their local schools, are picking up more of the burden.

Local public schools are at a breaking point. These new private school proposals will hasten their demise. Governor, it's time to stand by your promise and make our public schools "whole".