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Bill would require referendum before funds diverted to private schools at property taxpayer expense.

MADISON - Four Democratic budget and education leaders lauded voters on Thursday for supporting public education in districts across the state and called for the same control over new spending at taxpayer-funded voucher schools that voters currently have over public schools.

"Schools districts across Wisconsin are forced to go to referendum time and again just to keep the lights on in schools that have served generations of Wisconsinites very well," said Sen. **Jan et Bewley** (D-Delta). "Our bill would give property taxpayers the final say on whether they want to be on the hook for tax dollars taken directly out of public schools to fund voucher operations."

The legislators plan to introduce legislation requiring a referendum to pass before voucher schools can take state aid out of a public school district. The 2015 state budget changed state law to divert state funding, at a rate much higher per student than public schools receive, to voucher schools. The legislators believe voters deserve the same referendum oversight they have over public schools when property taxpayers are liable to face increases because voucher payments are being siphoned off.

"Our Republican colleagues decided to expand the voucher program into every corner of the state on the backs of property taxpayers," said Sen. **Mark Miller** (D-Monona). "This bill would make voucher operators and their lobbyists answerable to voters before property taxpayers are forced to make up the difference."

Under Gov. Walker's proposed state budget, school districts would lose $7700-$8400 per student in general state aid to voucher schools by 2019. The legislators noted figures from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau showing that public school students receive only $6700 on average, meaning voucher schools are taking more out of public schools per student than state aid puts in.

"As state legislators we are responsible for state funding of public education. When we pointed out that voucher schools were receiving much more from the state per student than our public schools, voucher supporters were quick to shift attention to property taxes," said Rep. **Sondy Pope**
(D-Mount Horeb). "Public schools have made the case to property taxpayers in referendum after referendum and the voucher industry should be able to do the same."

Additional figures from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau show that districts are losing $25.5 million to voucher schools this year alone.

"Under the last budget, Republicans changed state law to require that local property taxpayers now have to pay for private school tuition. In addition, three out of four of these private school students were already enrolled in private school before property taxpayers started picking up the tab," said Rep. **Gordon Hintz** (D-Oshkosh). "Public school districts throughout state, including 40 more this week, have gone to voters to raise property taxes. It is only fair that voters have an equal say on whether or not they want their property tax dollars diverted to private school tuition."

The lawmakers pointed out that communities were forced to go to referendum 225 times since the beginning of 2016. School districts seeking voter approval to exceed revenue caps must provide detailed information on how tax dollars would be spent. The Democratic legislators said their bill will give taxpayers the opportunity to require voucher schools seeking local and state tax dollars to do the same.

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