MADISON - At listening sessions across Wisconsin this past month, thousands of residents testified in support of local schools, cost-saving health care programs and responsible environmental stewardship.

These are the investments that make Wisconsin the state we all love and value. So why are Republicans proposing cuts to all of these areas? Why, at a time of national economic growth and prosperity, is Wisconsin facing a $2.2 billion deficit?

After four years of special interest giveaways and tax breaks for the wealthy, Wisconsin has fallen further behind our neighboring states and the rest of the country.

While other states are investing in families, strengthening communities and growing their economies, Gov. Walker and legislative Republicans have created a massive $2.2 billion budget deficit and are moving our state backwards. Wisconsin has dropped nine spots to 40th in the nation for job growth and we are experiencing the worst middle-class decline in the country.

We need to turn our state around. Something needs to change.

If we want our next generation to succeed in an increasingly competitive global economy, we need to invest in our children's future. Republicans have made the largest cuts to public schools in Wisconsin's history to provide massive giveaways to special interests. Rather than diverting even more money to subsidize an unaccountable private school voucher program, we should strengthen and improve the public school system we already have.

In fact, nearly $375 million could be used for school funding and property tax relief if Republicans would simply accept federal dollars to strengthen BadgerCare. This move would free up millions that could be used to invest in our schools, improve health care access and create thousands of good paying jobs in Wisconsin.

Unfortunately, Wisconsin taxpayers have been forced to pay more and get less as a result of the misguided budget decisions made over the past four years. With a self-inflicted $2.2 billion budget deficit, stagnant family wages and a lagging economy, it's time we get back to our core values and priorities.

What does it say about our state's priorities when we have a Republican budget that spends more state taxpayer dollars on prison incarceration than UW education? What does it say about our priorities when Republicans reject federal BadgerCare funding and then propose health care fee increases for seniors? What does it say about our priorities when Republicans limit environmental conservation and then open the door to allow corporate naming of state parks?

These certainly aren't the priorities or values that Wisconsin families have expressed over the past several months.

If legislative Republicans can afford to subsidize Gov. Walker's international campaign trips with taxpayer funding, then surely we can find a way to protect our schools, working families and local communities from another round of devastating cuts.

After all, budgets are about priorities.

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