

Residents Question Public School Money Going to Private Schools

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At a Town Hall in rural Northwestern Wisconsin, people are concerned about the amount of their state tax dollars being siphoned away from their local public schools to cover the cost of private school students elsewhere. They value their schools and feel the heavy burden of less state aid through higher property taxes.

PEPIN, WI - "I am paying for private schools with my taxes?" the women from Pepin asked following my presentation at a recent Town Hall meeting. "Yes, you are," I told her.



Residents were surprised at the sharp increase in the state spending on private schools – nearly a doubling in seven years. At the same time, Pepin School District lost nearly half of its state support. With less state money, property taxes made up a larger share of school support.

Wisconsin has funded private schools in Milwaukee by taking money from local public schools for a long time.

With passage of the last state budget, private and independent charter schools in southeast Wisconsin cost state tax coffers \$645 million.

As I explained at the Town Hall Meeting, this is only the beginning of putting a price tag on private school spending buried in the state budget. Much of the cost of private school students bore by public schools is not transparent.

For example, public schools must pay to transport private school students. One Pepin resident asked why her neighbor was paid by the state to take her child to a private school. The cost, bore by the Pepin School District, was less expensive than sending a school bus to transport the child.

Public schools districts pick up other private school costs. The cost of special education services come out of the local public school budgets for some private school students.

Over the past few years, payments for private schools directly from local public school districts rose as the statewide “voucher” or private school subsidies grew.

The most recent state budget removed limits on how many students from a school district can go to a private school at the expense of the public school district – and local taxpayers.

Consequently, some districts – like Eau Claire – experienced a quadrupling of students leaving public school and going to private school on the taxpayer's dime.

State law sets the amount of money coming from a public school district at about \$7,800 for high school students and about \$7,200 for elementary students. Some public school districts may receive much less aid per public student from the state. For example, the Eau Claire school district received about \$5,100 per student in state aid but paid out about \$7,800 per private high school student leaving local property taxpayers to pick up the difference between those amounts.

Wisconsin property taxpayers already pick up 41 cents of every school dollar spent compared to Minnesota property taxpayers' 25 cents of every school dollar. These numbers are from a recent United States Census Bureau report using data from the 2014 school year.

Costs of private school subsidies will continue to grow even if more students do not opt for a private school education at the public's expense. Buried in details of the most recent state budget is an automatic increase in the amount sent to private schools for each student regardless of whether or not the public school receives any increase in state support.

One of the Pepin Town Hall attendees reminded me that I made no mention of the tax credit for private school tuition also passed in a recent budget. The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau pegs the cost of this credit at \$11.5 million in tax year 2014.

Recent news from Madison described another new scheme for private schools – a type of tax-free private school savings account. Rep. Dale Kooyenga (R-Brookfield) described the proposal as an account that could be used to pay for private school tuition and other costs. Parents either could use a debit card to access the money or be reimbursed for their expenses.

Wisconsin does not need any more plans to siphon public school money away from local schools. In a recent press release, statewide education leader and Eau Claire schoolteacher, Ron Martin said it best “Education savings accounts literally take money out of our neighborhood public schools and hands it over to subsidize private tuition, with zero accountability.”

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