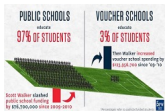


Wisconsin Leading the Way in State Cuts to Schools?

Posted on Jul 07, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Sen. Kathleen Vinehout's column focuses on cuts to state aid to school districts. She refers to a recent study that shows **Wisconsin is second only to Alabama in cuts in state per pupil aid**. She shares information about the impact of the cuts on school districts in the 31st Senate District.

PEPIN, WI - "Hard to believe we are in competition for last place!" said Pepin Superintendent Bruce Quinton. This is hard to believe indeed.

A recently released study of state budget cuts to local schools has Wisconsin ranked second only to Alabama in cuts per pupil.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities looked at state dollars spent per student. Wisconsin students receive \$1,038 less per pupil in the 2013-14 school year than when the recession hit in 2008. North Dakota, which topped the list in new dollars per child, posted a \$1,116 increase since 2008. Changes in spending were adjusted for inflation.

Wisconsin's ranking isn't so hard to believe if you've lived through the last four years working in one of our local schools.

"Less funding, more mandates, higher expectations. No successful business or organization runs according to these concepts. If the goal is truly to improve education, then our lawmakers should stand up for adequate funding for our children's education," wrote Mr. Quinton.

Standing up for higher funding means voting against deep cuts that did not have to happen. In my 2011 alternative budget I showed how schools could be adequately funded. Again in 2013, I showed how to pay for a new school funding formula to correct the unfairness suffered by Pepin, Alma and other rural schools.

Instead, a majority of lawmakers voted to cut school funding. With less state aid, superintendents were forced to cut staff, cut teachers and send the remaining teachers back to school to cover more subjects.

In order to survive school administrators cover multiple roles including teaching. School districts share sports and many other services. One school counselor I spoke with this summer resigned after spending several years serving three rural schools. "It's just too much," she told me.

One effect of deep cuts in state school funds is an increase in property taxes.

Earlier this year the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported that dozens of cash-strapped rural schools had placed "high-stakes tax hikes to voters" to keep rural schools operating.

"The controversial Act 10 legislation signed by Gov. Scott Walker in 2011 decreased state aid," reported the Sentinel in March, "but restricted districts from raising property taxes to make up for the budget shortfall. Instead, the legislation allowed districts more flexibility to get savings from employees, such as by changing health care plans or adjusting salaries."

"We're told 'you've got the tools' [to cut costs] but what does that mean?" Mr. Quinton told me. "Please explain to me again how to use the 'tools' to destroy the morale of the very people I count on to educate children."

Personnel costs make up most of a school district's expenses. People have already seen deep cuts in salaries. Schools already require employees to pay a larger percentage of health care costs. Health care benefits have already been deeply trimmed.

To make matters worse, the Department of Public Instruction recently released estimated general state aid for schools for the coming school year showing deep cuts in aid for Pepin.

Both Pepin and Alma will receive the deepest cuts allowed by state law – over 15%. Blair-Taylor will see over a 10% cut in state aid. The Eau Claire Area School District received the largest cut in dollar amount- dropping by \$2.3 million. These aid estimates do not include categorical aid targeted for specific programs.

Overall, schools in the 31st Senate District saw a paltry average increase of less than .04%. Statewide, the average increase was about 2%.

In a follow-up conversation with the Pepin Superintendent, I learned that the Pepin district taxpayers next year will pick up 88% of the cost of educating a student.

And the same state budget that sends Pepin taxpayers only \$1,667 of general state aid per student, will send private schools \$7,856 per high school student and \$7,210 for K-8 students.

These are the direct effects of budget decisions made by a majority of lawmakers.

I can't think of anyone who really wants Wisconsin to fight Alabama for the distinction of having made the largest cuts in per pupil state aid to schools.

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