

Voters Show Strong Support for Local Schools

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Voters across the state decided to raise their property taxes in order to save their schools. The use of referenda for continuation of school operations is the result of less state aid coming into school districts.

MADISON - "I voted for the referendum," the Mondovi woman told me. "I don't have kids. I know it's going to raise my property taxes. I don't want to pay more, but I think we need to keep good schools."

All across Wisconsin voters chose to raise property taxes in support of their schools by passing school referenda.

Ten years ago only 24% of school referenda passed. This year 68% passed. No year in the past 20 comes close to that percentage except 2012.

Following the 2011 historic cuts in state school aid, Wisconsin voters passed 53 of 77 school referenda in 2012. This year, voters faced 120 referenda and passed 82.

Why did voters across the state vote to raise their own property taxes?

Voters believe in the importance of strong local schools. People saw how schools consolidated; how school districts share services, staff, even football teams. Voters know fewer dollars mean

fewer opportunities for children.

Voters see schools as the heart of their community and their schools require funding. Eight out of ten of the referenda passed this year provide for continued operations of the schools, including safety and maintenance. Some of these schools faced closure – for example elementary schools in Eleva and Strum. Others faced leaky roofs, potholes in parking lots, staff cuts, aging technology and increased class sizes.

Rural schools are especially hard hit, as the state's funding formula doesn't recognize the cost structure of many schools. When schools lose students, they lose state aid - which drops faster than the school's ability to cut expenses.

School board members tell me it takes so much money just to open the doors and heat the building. State aid doesn't account for these high fixed costs. The state pays on a per student basis, but more than 60% of schools have fewer students every year. Fewer students and less state aid means more costs pushed on property taxpayers.

At what point do we reach the limit of a community's ability to pay increased property taxes? Soon, local people tell me. I'm reminded of a Pepin resident who rode a school bus to Madison to tell me that he loves his school but he can't pay any more in property tax.

That is why Republican Governor Tommy Thompson invested in state support for schools by providing 2/3rds state funding for schools. As a result, property taxes dropped over 3% each year for two years in a row.

But state support as a percent of total school costs has eroded ever since.

Recently huge sums of state dollars were subtracted from the public school budget. Over the past four years, a cumulative one billion in state dollars were removed from the budget of local schools across the state. At the same time hundreds of millions in new dollars went to state subsidized private schools in one of the largest new state sponsored entitlements we've seen in years.

Private school parents tell me they don't even like the idea of private schools getting large sums of taxpayer dollars – in some Milwaukee private schools 100% of their school budget is taxpayer money.

Behind the push for state subsidized private schools is a national movement made up of some very wealthy groups who see dollar signs when it comes to state subsidized private schools.

And caught holding the bag are folks in districts where referenda passed who all will be writing checks in the next few weeks to pay property taxes.

Great schools make for great communities. You can't have one without the other. Folks know schools are the heart of the community. We see all those who attend a school function and realize in no other place do so many gather. Everyone benefits from an investment in education.

I heard of a school district with a failed referendum now considering cuts to science classes. Imagine the future doctor who doesn't get the science she needs and the lost potential to cure your loved one's ailment 15 years from now.

This is why we must invest in public schools now.

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