http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/school-kids-s5.jpg 

***Gov. Walker and Republicans have cut hundreds of millions from our state's traditional priorities like education to fund tax breaks for the wealthy. Local taxpayers want education to be a priority again, and have shown it by passing referendums to raise their own property taxes to partially replace the funding cuts their public schools have received.***

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MADISON - Until recently, state investment in public education was a top priority in Wisconsin. Preserving and working to improve our public education system is vital for our children and our state's future. The past bipartisan success that came from supporting our public schools is why so many people chose Wisconsin to live, work and raise their families.

Unfortunately, since taking control of state government five years ago, Governor Walker and Republicans have rapidly shifted priorities in our state. They have placed a strong emphasis on diverting hundreds of millions in state resources toward tax breaks that primarily benefit the wealthy over many of our state's most valued institutions, like education, infrastructure, and natural resources.

For instance, take the Governor's so-called Manufacturing and Agriculture Tax Credit he said was aimed at job growth. This regressive and expensive tax break will divert $490 million from this budget alone, with no requirement that a single job be created. A whopping 88% of the credit used against the individual income tax will be claimed by the top 0.07% of income tax filers, or people who make $500,000 or more per year. That same group (expected to be less than 2,300 filers across the state) will receive over $176 million in credits just in this year.

Tax giveaways like these have resulted in state budget cuts. Since 2011, our public school classrooms have been one of the biggest victims, receiving over one billion dollars in funding cuts.

Because of these decisions, communities have had to make a difficult choice when it comes to

their public schools: increase local property taxes through referendums, or cut school resources?

In the past, school districts typically used referendums for one-time expenses like remodeling or constructing new buildings or purchasing new equipment. But this state-inflicted funding crisis has Wisconsin's public schools going to referendums just to maintain programs, classes, and other basic operating expenses. This year, local school districts asked their voters to approve the largest amount of assistance going back at least a decade.

Before Governor Walker and Republicans took control, referendums usually had a 50/50 chance of passing. Since then, however, approval rates have jumped to over 80 percent, showing that Wisconsinites still believe public education is a top priority and recognize the deep harm to public schools if nothing is done. This spring, 46 school districts in the state had non-building referendums on the ballot.

So what is the impact? Since Governor Walker has taken office, taxpayers have stepped up and voted to raise their own property taxes through operating referendums in 127 school districts (30%) by over $600 million. That means that the resources raised through referendums for these schools is going towards basic operating expenses. The public school investment that used to be funded at the state level is increasing being funded on the backs of local property taxpayers, while the Governor continues to slash taxes for the top 1% of income earners.

The Governor and state legislators have a constitutional obligation to fund an equal opportunity public education, and they are clearly failing. Our local schools should not have to go to referendum to avoid harmful cuts to educational programs. The sheer number of referendums on the ballot this spring and Wisconsinites' overwhelming agreement to approve them, even when it means money out of their own pockets, sends a clear message. The failure of the Governor and Republicans to fund our classrooms is causing harm, and taxpayers want public schools to be a priority again.

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