

Local Schools See Fewer State Dollars While Private "Voucher" Schools Win Big

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the impact of shrinking state revenues for local schools districts while private “voucher” schools are receiving historically high per pupil state aid.

The 2013-15 State Budget set the private “voucher” school per pupil state aid at \$7,856 for high school students and \$7,210 for K-8 students. At the same time many school districts in the 31st Senate District are receiving far less state aid per pupil.

MADISON - “How is it possible that private voucher schools can receive almost four and a half times the state funding per student as our public school district receives in equalized aid,” Pepin School Superintendent Bruce Quinton wrote me.

As a new school year begins, students and parents see changes; for example, increased meal costs, larger class sizes, retiring teachers not replaced and fewer teachers’ aides. There are fewer janitors and delayed maintenance; longer bus rides and fewer field trips; fewer music and art classes.

Many public schools are forced to do more with less because lawmakers who voted for the last state budget increased state tax dollars to private schools. Nearly half of Wisconsin’s public schools will receive less aid this school year than the last – including many of our local schools.

Eau Claire received the largest dollar amount cut statewide – over \$2.3 million while Pepin and

Alma received the largest local percentage cuts - over 15%. At the same time, state aid per pupil going to private 'voucher' schools reached its highest point in state history.

In his letter, Superintendent Quinton noted the difference between amounts of state aid for Pepin to that of private schools: for the 2014-15 school year Pepin receives \$1,667 per student; public tax dollars to private 'voucher' schools are \$7,856 per high school student and \$7,210 per K-8 student.

"Pepin Area School District taxpayers will pay an additional \$70,119 in taxes to educate children in other districts this school year," Mr. Quinton wrote. "I cannot comprehend why taxpayers are willing to subsidize a private voucher school education system, especially when research indicates that private voucher schools perform at best as well as the public school system and in many cases below their public school peers."

A memo from the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) detailing figures from the 2013-14 school year show that Pepin's state aid payment per pupil was \$4,559 less than the per pupil state aid payment made to private 'voucher' schools.

The effects of reduced state aid for schools are many and include lower salaries for staff. The Eau Claire School District learned their base salaries fall below the 50th percentile of the market's base salaries. This makes it difficult to attract and retain top quality staff.

A study released by the Wisconsin Budget Project, an arm of Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, recounts the effects of several years of slim funds to local schools. "As the new school year approaches, Wisconsin schools face significant challenges, including class sizes that have grown faster than the national average, an increasing number of students living in poverty, and a reduction in state support for education."

Fewer state dollars means higher property taxes as schools unable to make ends meet head to referendum.

Voters in Mondovi, Altoona, and Black River Falls face a fall referenda vote to raise property

taxes to pay for building improvements or, for Mondovi, school operations. Voters in Black River Falls will decide, among other projects, whether to replace the 'temporary' trailers which housed elementary students for many years.

Voters in Eleva-Strum passed a referendum to exceed the revenue limit under threat of "massive budget deficits" that would lead to reduction in funds for a school psychologist, janitors, a library aide and a bus route. The district is also considering closing elementary schools in Eleva and Strum.

Resolving problems facing local schools will require a shift in state policy. A majority of lawmakers must realize Wisconsin cannot afford two parallel school systems. Without significant increases in taxes we cannot use state tax dollars for both public and private schools. One will suffer while the other thrives. We can see this happening already in the Milwaukee area.

State Superintendent Tony Evers proposed changes to the school aid formula that would address some of the difficulties facing rural schools. In addition to his proposed changes, sparsity aid - which I created in the 2007-09 budget - must be expanded. There is no other aid that directly assists suffering rural schools with no strings attached.

Public education is the key to prosperity. Our future depends on our investment in our children.

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