



A Summary of the Wisconsin Budget for K-12 Education

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The 2015-17 Wisconsin budget minimally increases state support to public schools, lowers property taxes compared to what they would otherwise be, and devotes new resources to voucher schools.

LITTLE IN THE WAY OF NEW RESOURCES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The budget allots \$208 million in new public education funding over the next two years, compared to the previous budget. The complexities of the school funding system make it difficult to pinpoint the share of new resources for education that will actually go to public schools, but much of the new money will get delivered to public schools in a way that will not allow districts to put that money to work educating public school students.

New resources for education – but not necessarily public schools – include:

- A \$108 million increase in general aid to public K-12 schools, which the state is requiring school districts to mostly use to lower property tax bills. The budget freezes revenue limits for school districts, capping the amount of money districts can take in through the combination of general state aid and property taxes combined. Because general state aid went up and school districts for the most part are not allowed to increase their budgets, school districts will have to pass most of the increase in general aid through to property tax payers. Some will be shifted to voucher and charter schools.
- An \$84 million increase in per-pupil aid, which will mostly go to public schools. A small portion will go to private voucher schools.
- An \$8 million increase for public school districts in rural areas, which have been hit particularly hard by declining enrollment and cuts in state aid.
- A \$5 million increase for educating students who need high-cost special education.

In recent years, Wisconsin has dramatically reduced the amount of state support for public schools. Wisconsin cut state support for investment in schools by 15% per student between 2008 and 2015, a deeper cut than all but four other states. That 15% cut (in inflation-adjusted spending) means the state is spending \$1,014 less on each student now than compared to 2008. The small increase in resources for public schools included in the 2015-17 budget does not do much to restore state support lost in past years.

REDIRECTING RESOURCES FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS

The budget expands the state's parental choice program, which allows students from low and moderate income families to attend private schools using publicly-funded tuition vouchers. Wisconsin already has voucher school programs in Milwaukee and Racine, and a limited voucher program in the rest of the state.

The total number of students who could participate in the voucher program outside of Milwaukee and Racine will start at 1% of a district's enrollment and climb each year until the cap is lifted in a decade. Lawmakers could revisit that phase-in schedule to speed up the process of expanding vouchers statewide, as they have in the past.

The expansion of the voucher program will reduce state funding for public schools by \$48 million over two years, and increase support for private schools by the same amount. The budget specifies that when a student leaves a public school to attend a private school using a tuition voucher, aid to that school district is decreased. Districts with voucher students count those students for purposes of determining property tax levy limits and per-student aid payments from the state, and then pay a set amount per student into the voucher school program. The budget does not change the way that the state pays tuition costs for students already in the voucher program, or for new students in the Milwaukee voucher program.

Students already attending private schools will be able to receive vouchers if they enter the voucher program in the 2015-16 school year, but entrance into the program starting in 2016-17 will mostly be restricted to students who previously attended public schools.

School districts that do not have any students attending voucher schools will still likely have their general state aid decreased slightly under this proposal to pay for the voucher program. Some students who receive vouchers never attended public school, yet will be counted for purposes of determining state aid. The amount of some state aid to districts is determined by dividing the total aid amount by the number of students in that district. With the higher student enrollments, the per-student aid amounts to schools will be lower, regardless of whether any students in a particular district attend voucher schools.

The budget also allows students with disabilities to attend private schools using publicly-funded vouchers, if the student had previously applied to attend a different school district under the open enrollment program, and been declined. Students with disabilities who attend private schools do not have the same protections and rights as those who attend public schools. Intense opposition by disability-rights groups defeated previous proposals to implement a voucher program for students with disabilities.

The budget also includes a measure under which some of the worst-performing schools in Milwaukee Public Schools will be turned over to private school or charter school operators. Teachers and others who worked at those schools will be fired and required to reapply for their jobs. This measure could also apply to the Racine or Madison school districts in the future, if student performance in those schools slips.

In addition, the budget establishes new ways to create independent charter schools, without the approval of the local school board. Among those options is the creation of a new “Office of Educational Opportunity” within the University of Wisconsin System, which will be authorized to create independent charter schools in districts with at least 25,000 students – i.e., Milwaukee and Madison. As charter schools expand, they will be financed like vouchers by shifting funding from public school districts.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENTS

The budget includes changes that will:

- Overhaul the report card system that shows how well schools and districts are meeting expectations.
- End the use of assessments aligned with the Common Core, a set of educational standards developed by states working together.
- Provide an additional \$7 million over two years to implement new statewide assessments.
- Seek a rule change from the federal government so that public schools, charter schools, and private voucher schools could choose which assessment they wanted to administer, rather than all having to administer the same one. This measure would make it more difficult to compare student performance across types of schools.

OTHER CHANGES TO EDUCATION

The budget includes other changes that will affect K-12 education, including:

- Allowing high school students to earn up to half the credits necessary for graduation by demonstrating competency or creating a “learning portfolio.”
- Phasing out a voluntary racial integration program that helps racially balance Milwaukee’s city and suburban schools.
- Prohibiting students from graduating unless they pass a civics test.
- Requiring the state to grant a Wisconsin teaching license to any individual who previously had a teaching license in another state and at least a year of experience. Put another way, Wisconsin will have to grant teaching licenses to individuals with licenses from other states, even if the other states dramatically lower standards for licensing.

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Dollar figures refer to spending from the state’s general fund, the state’s main account for services like education and health care.