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Proposed Limits Would Make it More Difficult for Voters to Approve New Resources for Schools

Wisconsin lawmakers have proposed a change that would make it more difficult for voters to approve additional resources for children in public schools in their districts.

The state limits the average amount each school district may spend to educate students, but voters in a district can override the spending limit by approving a referendum lifting the spending caps. Voters also determine, via referendum, whether to allow a school district to issue debt for big capital projects, such as building a new school. District residents have voted in referenda 380 times since July 2011, approving two-thirds of them.

Wisconsin lawmakers are seeking to limit the opportunities voters have to approve referenda, by prohibiting a school district from sending a referendum to voters for a period of two years after an earlier referendum, if the first referendum was rejected by voters. A school board would not be able to adopt a resolution calling for a referendum or be able to hold a referendum within 730 days of the date that the board adopted the resolution calling for the initial referendum.

This prohibition (Assembly Bill 481/Senate Bill 355) would apply even if the second referendum was unrelated to the first, unsuccessful, one. This prohibition would not apply to the time period after a successful referendum. The bill would also prohibit school districts from using a variety of other financing methods, such as short-term borrowing, in the two years after a referendum did not pass.

Imposing a window during which districts cannot ask voters to approve new resources would reduce, or at least delay, the number of successful referenda, and reduce resources for students in public schools. The state Department of Public Instruction, which collects information on school referenda, does not publish the dates on which school boards adopt resolutions calling for referenda, but does publish referendum dates. One approach to measure the potential effect of a waiting period is to identify the number of school districts in which voters pass a successful referendum within a two-year period after an unsuccessful referendum. This approach is the best possible given the information available, but somewhat overstates the future impact of a waiting period because basing that period on the dates of the authorizing resolutions gives school boards a little flexibility to avoid the problem that spring elections two years apart are sometimes less than 730 days apart.

Since July 2011, voters in 31 districts have successfully passed a total of 36 referenda within two years of turning down a referendum. These successful referenda – which might not have been allowed to go to voters when they did if the proposed change had been in effect – represent \$196 million in voter-approved resources devoted to improving Wisconsin public schools.

Many Successful School Referenda Pass within Two Years of an Unsuccessful Referendum

Number, types, and dollar amounts of successful referenda passed less than two years after an unsuccessful referendum in the same district, starting in July 2011. These referenda might not have been allowed as passed if a policy change proposed by lawmakers had been in place at the time.

| TYPE OF REFERENDUM | AMOUNT, IN MILLIONS | NUMBER OF REFERENDA |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Issue debt | \$143.3 | 13 |
| <u>Exceed revenue limits</u> | <u>\$53.0</u> | <u>23</u> |
| Total | \$196.3 | 36 |

Source: Analysis of figures from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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This analysis was updated January 15, 2016 to clarify that the two-year waiting period after an unsuccessful referendum begins on the date on which the school board adopts the resolution, rather than on the date the referendum is held.

Successful School District Referenda Passed Less than Two Years After an Unsuccessful Referendum

July 2011 to October 2015

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | AMOUNT | TYPE | DATE | PURPOSE |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------------------|------------|---|
| Arcadia | \$14,000,000 | Issue debt | 11/05/2013 | Build a new grade 5-8 school, update existing elementary building |
| Barron Area | \$3,950,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 08/14/2012 | Reinstitute educational programs that have been cut, repair sidewalks, buy buses |
| Big Foot UHS | \$4,950,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Hire math and science teachers, replace school vehicles, improve support for at-risk students |
| Bonduel | \$900,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/02/2013 | Purchase computers for classrooms |
| Brillion | \$2,950,000 | Issue debt | 04/01/2014 | Improve STEM (Science, technology, engineering and math) facilities in elementary school, upgrade safety and security |
| Delavan-Darien | \$2,500,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 02/17/2015 | Avoid eliminating teaching positions and increasing class sizes |
| Denmark | \$2,600,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Avoid potential cuts in support for students struggling to learn to read or to instruction for sick or disabled students |
| Dodgeville | \$1,300,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 11/06/2012 | Address safety and security needs, remove asbestos |
| Durand | \$13,480,000 | Issue debt | 04/07/2015 | Add on classroom and other space to elementary school, renovate science labs and tech ed area at middle/high school |
| East Troy Community | \$22,500,000 | Issue debt | 04/07/2015 | Build new elementary school, make energy improvements at middle school, add classrooms at high school, |
| East Troy Community | \$2,200,000 | Issue debt | 04/07/2015 | Add space for second graders in new elementary school building construction |
| Ellsworth Community | \$3,900,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Avoid cuts in staff, technology, maintenance, and curricular and extra-curricular offerings |
| Hillsboro | \$2,000,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 02/17/2015 | Improve buildings and grounds safety and maintenance needs |
| Johnson Creek | \$18,900,000 | Issue debt | 04/01/2014 | Construction of a new building for grades 5 through 12 |
| Lake Holcombe | \$2,025,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/02/2013 | Avoid potentially dissolving school district |
| Lake Mills Area | \$18,700,000 | Issue debt | 11/06/2012 | Construction of a new elementary school and demolition of the old one |
| Linn J6 | \$2,800,000 | Issue debt | 11/06/2012 | Repair and replace facilities at elementary school |
| Manitowoc | \$3,000,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Avoid potentially closing an elementary school or increasing class sizes |
| Manitowoc | \$1,800,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Upgrade facilities for several schools (roofs, exterior doors, flooring, fire alarm system, windows) and improve security |
| Manitowoc | \$1,200,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Update classroom technology and replace existing computers in classrooms and labs |
| Markesan | \$2,780,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 08/12/2014 | Avoid closing schools and partial consolidation with another district |

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | AMOUNT | TYPE | DATE | PURPOSE |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|------------|---|
| Oakfield | \$6,600,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Avoid potentially dissolving school district |
| Oconto Falls | \$1,200,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 08/12/2014 | Purchase educational technology, repair roof, retain teachers |
| Oconto Falls | \$2,200,000 | Issue debt | 08/12/2014 | Add new athletic facilities, improve driveways and parking lots |
| Owen-Withee | \$1,500,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Prevent cuts to all art, music, tech ed, agricultural education, and athletics. Avoid possibility of consolidation with another district |
| Parkview | \$1,050,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Purchase technology and curriculum materials, and address special education costs |
| Parkview | \$17,000,000 | Issue debt | 04/01/2014 | Add commons area, classrooms, and gym |
| Prescott | \$3,890,000 | Issue debt | 02/17/2015 | Add a high school auditorium |
| Princeton | \$1,350,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Avoid consolidation with another school district |
| Pulaski Community | \$4,370,000 | Issue debt | 04/02/2013 | Address district-wide maintenance and remodeling projects |
| Rice Lake Area | \$20,320,000 | Issue debt | 11/05/2013 | Update science and technology areas, renovate building systems to meet current codes, improve safety of student drop-off area |
| Southern Door County | \$390,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 11/04/2014 | Maintain academic achievement and extracurricular programs, recruit and retain staff |
| Turtle Lake | \$1,785,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 11/06/2012 | Purchase educational technology, improve security, obtain curriculum materials |
| Wabeno Area | \$2,250,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/01/2014 | Continue programs and opportunities offered to students |
| Wheatland J1 | \$2,500,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 10/14/2014 | Avoid increasing class sizes and possible dissolution of the district |
| White Lake | \$1,500,000 | Exceed revenue limits | 04/07/2015 | Maintain existing programs, replace elementary school roof, address deferred maintenance |

Source: Analysis of figures from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, news and web reports

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Notes

- This analysis includes referenda included in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction online database of school referenda as of October 15, 2015, and includes referenda held on or after July 1, 2011.
- This analysis does not include the effects of the proposed restrictions that would limit when during the year school districts may schedule referendum elections.
- The list shows the districts in which votes have passed referenda within two years of an unsuccessful referendum. The proposal requires a two-year waiting period starting from the date the school board adopts the resolution calling for the referendum, rather than starting from the date of the actual referendum. While this analysis uses the best available data, it somewhat overstates the effect of the waiting period.