



Jon Erpenbach

WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR · DISTRICT 27

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
8/22/2019

CONTACT: Senator Jon Erpenbach
608.266.6670

Taxpayers Bear the Costs of Unaccountable Choice Programs

By: Jon Erpenbach

With students heading back to school, parents and taxpayers are reminded of the opportunities and costs of quality education. While Governor Evers fought for record investments in our schools, many public schools and their taxpayers are forced to bear the costs of unaccountable choice programs. In my district, the Baraboo School Board made their voices heard. They asked for the state to be transparent when it comes to choice school programs, and to let taxpayers know how their money is being diverted.

In 96.7% of Wisconsin school districts, voucher operators will take more money from taxpayers than schools will receive in state general aid per student. Many taxpayers did not sign up for funding more than one school system, and Republicans continue to push a program that does not have the same standards or oversight as public institutions.

During the 2019-2021 budget deliberations, Governor Evers proposed numerous measures to ensure that charter and choice schools were held to higher standards. In the People's Budget, the Governor recommended that choice programs require teachers to obtain a teaching license or permit from the Department of Public Instruction. Shockingly, Republicans removed the provision. Additionally, Governor Evers proposed that private school choice programs seek accreditation for their institutions, but Republicans also deleted that provision. Without meeting the minimal standards we require for public schools, choice programs are taking funds away from public classrooms.

In the 27th district, every school district will receive less in general aid per student than a voucher payment would take from the district. Voucher operators take \$8,046 from the district's general aid for K-8 students, and \$8,692 for 9-12 students, while the average general aid for students in the 27th district is only \$4,922. The facts are clear, public schools are already cutting corners to stay afloat, while handing essential dollars over to voucher programs.

Voucher programs put a strain on public schools, and also property taxpayers. Wisconsinites are raising their own taxes in order to ensure that their communities have quality public schools, without receiving the full story on how their money is already being spent. Taxpayers deserve full transparency when it comes to the unreliable voucher program.

That is why I have always been an avid supporter of public education. Much like the request of the Baraboo School District, during the 2017-2018 session, I was a co-sponsor of Senate Bill 183, which required property tax bills to include information on the reduction in state aid to their district as a result of students enrolled in the statewide choice program. The bill never left committee. Governor Evers included a similar proposal in his budget. Again, legislative Republicans shielded voucher operators from accountability and transparency by removing the proposal without discussion.

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This wasn't the first time that I pushed for transparency in the choice program, and it will not be the last. Taxpayers have been burdened by bad policies under Republican leadership, and forcing homeowners to pay for a second school system without any accountability is foolish.

Students in Wisconsin deserve the best education possible, and it is up to us to deliver on that promise. Schools are the backbones of our communities, and it is vital that we fund our classrooms. Voucher schools have been detrimental to many communities around the state, and I will continue to push for accountability and transparency on this unreliable program.

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