

Katrina Shankland: The cost of failed leadership

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A budget is about priorities. You can learn a lot about a person and what they value by what they choose to prioritize. With the passage of the state budget, Republican legislators and Governor Walker have made it clear where their values lie – with private voucher schools over public schools, with wealthy special interests over working families, and with even more transportation debt and delayed road projects.

In their first three budgets with total control of state government, Republicans took a sledgehammer to Wisconsin's educational institutions. Public schools lost over \$1 billion in state aid, the UW System lost \$795 million, and our technical colleges lost millions as well. At the same time, Republicans massively expanded taxpayer funding to private schools without holding them to the same standards as public schools. That money is being taken directly from your neighborhood public schools, which are already struggling to get by.

It's time to set the record straight. Far from a "historic investment" in education, this budget dedicates the second lowest percentage of general fund dollars to public schools in 20 years. Behind closed doors, Republicans bickered over whether to allow wealthier families to get taxpayer money to send their kids to private school. Meanwhile, a single adult working full-time at minimum wage earns too much to qualify for healthcare assistance through BadgerCare Plus. How's that for priorities?

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This budget also fails to find a funding solution for our roads and bridges, which are in desperate need of repair. Wisconsin roads are some of the worst in the nation, and the longer we wait to fix them, the more taxpayers will pay in the long run. But taking on hundreds of millions of dollars in new debt is not the answer. Over 20% of our transportation fund spending is already being used to make payments on old debt, and Republicans just authorized \$402.4 million in new bonding. We can't continue to go down this pothole-filled road of delayed projects and higher debt.

We live in a 21st century information economy and competition is fierce. One of the best ways Wisconsin can remain competitive is by strengthening our workforce pipeline through robust investments in education and maintaining reliable infrastructure. But the Republican budget is two and a half months late and a dollar short. It does not restore the devastating cuts to our universities or tackle the student loan debt crisis, nor does it invest what's needed in our rural schools and roads. Instead, it slashes wages for construction workers and directs more tax breaks to the wealthiest.

The people of Wisconsin are fair – they give everyone a chance. But Governor Walker and Republican legislators have repeatedly failed to prioritize what matters most – public education, our workers, and our infrastructure. After nearly seven years of one-party rule, it's time to look to a new direction. The decisions state leaders make today will affect us all for years to come, and those decisions are too important to let one party act alone. Democrats are working on real solutions that help working families get ahead – we invite Republicans to work with us.

— *Shankland, D-Stevens Point, represents the 71st Assembly District in Portage County and serves on the legislature's Joint Committee on Finance.*