

Sens. Miller, Bewley and Reps. Milroy, Hebl: Misplaced priorities: More general revenue for voucher schools than environment

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New data from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau shows that — in addition to draining resources directly out of public schools and costing property taxpayers — unaccountable voucher schools would take up more of the state's general fund than all environmental resource funding in total under the proposed state budget.

"The Governor shirks his responsibility when he increases taxpayer subsidies for private voucher schools at the expense of our public resources. His priorities are upside down," Sen. Mark Miller (D-Monona) said.

On the heels of state budgets that have eliminated state general funding of state parks and other Wisconsin priorities, environmental resources will fall to 1.4% of the general fund by 2019, according to the memo. At the same time, spending on unaccountable voucher schools will have increased from 0.9% to 1.6% of all general tax dollars after just four GOP budgets.

"Families and businesses in the North have a far greater stake in our state's natural resources — it's a shame that Republican budgets are forcing taxpayers to spend more supporting the voucher operators' bottom line than supporting the lifeblood of our region," Sen. Janet Bewley (D-Delta) said. "We knew that state aid cuts were forcing schools to seek property tax dollars to keep the lights on. Under this budget general taxpayers would be forced to pay \$33.6 million more for private schools than Wisconsin treasures like our state parks."

The Fiscal Bureau memo addresses the state's general fund budget, drawn primarily from sales and income taxes, and does not address segregated or program revenue. The legislators pointed out that recent state budgets eliminating general funding for the state park system have significantly increased fees Wisconsin families pay while redirecting general tax dollars to private schools now supported by taxpayer-funded vouchers.

"Northern Wisconsin relies on tourism, sporting heritage and natural resources, not voucher schools," said Rep. Nick Milroy (D-South Range). "Our land, water and environment are much more of a priority than private schools located overwhelmingly in the southern half of the state."

Figures from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau show that voucher spending has more than doubled since 2010, now taking up \$283 million -1.6% of all general purpose revenue generated by the state's income and sales taxes. A separate Fiscal Bureau memo earlier this month showed the state payments per pupil to voucher school operators after four GOP budgets would exceed all state aid for 850,000+ public school students by \$1,000-\$1,700. Voucher supporters attributed the gap to property taxes Wisconsin homeowners pay to make up the difference.

"This shows the administration's true colors," said Gary Hebl (D-Sun Prairie). "They make overtures to public schools now that they have a re-election campaign coming up, but their actions speak louder than their words. They put public school kids on the back burner to pursue their own partisan political agendas."