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Wisconsin Education Association Council: Classroom participation: Outpouring of support for public schools

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Educators, parents, communities behind surge to make public schools a priority

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There is something significant happening in Wisconsin. And people are paying attention.

It's a massive groundswell of support for our public schools. A few weeks ago, Platteville area residents lined up for hours to tell lawmakers their rural students need opportunities restored after losing teachers and programs from years of cuts. Milwaukee is getting national attention for a different approach to school improvement – one that involves the community instead of shutting them out.

This surge in advocacy for public schools is no surprise, given that the vast majority of Wisconsin students attend public schools. Yet, those 860,000 students were shortchanged in the last few state budgets while tax subsidies for private schools skyrocketed. Wisconsinites now see the results playing out in our local schools. And we don't like it. A recent Marquette University Law School poll showed a whopping 80 percent of Wisconsinites believe we should invest more money in public

education.

After all, enough is enough.

Some lawmakers realize they had better get in front of this wave of support for public schools before they get all wet, coming forward so far with a state budget that – for the first time since 2011 – doesn't cut funding to public schools but instead provides basically an inflationary increase in per-pupil funding. There's also funding for a student mental health initiative developed by State Superintendent of Instruction Tony Evers, which educators have long called for after state cuts reduced the number of counselors, social workers and nurses in our schools. Some help for rural districts to afford teachers and transportation is also included, although there are no desperately-needed new special education funds.

These measures will be helpful, but there's so much more Wisconsin can do for our students – our future. And the good news is that there's funding available to do more – if lawmakers listen to the Wisconsin majority and say no to shifting even more public money to private voucher schools.

The budget proposal under development right now promises tax-funded tuition to about 33,750 students in 300 private, mostly religious schools. The price tag for taxpayers? About $263 million next school year alone.

How does that impact public schools? Our public school districts are forced to raise property taxes to fund tuition vouchers, even for the 75 percent of students who never attended a public school. Voters from Green Bay to Chippewa Falls and beyond have approved an unprecedented number of referenda just to maintain basic programs and services.

Now, there are a handful of legislators who want to make matters worse instead of better for students. They're proposing a package of bills to tie the hands of local school boards from providing for the schools they're entrusted by voters to lead.

Wisconsin has made it clear what we support: More funding for neighborhood public schools. It's time for elected leaders to deliver, with a budget that restores funding for the majority of students. A budget that reigns in exploding private voucher spending. And a budget without last-minute surprises that have never before seen the light of day, much less a public hearing.

As public school educators prepare the Class of 2017 to graduate into the world, we'll also be keeping a close eye on the value our elected officials place on our students. We won't be alone, we know the public is with us. We're all paying attention.