

# Jon Erpenbach: The facts behind the Republican budget: A story of missed opportunities

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On Wednesday, the Senate voted on the Republican version of the State Budget. The GOP budget removes Wisconsin's opportunity to make historic investments in our communities and keeps in place massive tax breaks for the wealthy. After Democrats on the Joint Committee on Finance fought for Governor Evers' proposals, Senate Democrats followed lead and introduced amendments to keep in place the most crucial and the most requested aspects of the People's Budget, including Medicaid expansion, fully funding education, protecting drinking water, and enacting tax fairness.

The Republican decision to not expand Medicaid is the most baffling, and financially irresponsible decision that they have made during the current budget process. The GOP's budget spends 317.4 million more of your state dollars, and rejects bringing home 1,236.6 billion in federal dollars compared to the People's Budget. Additionally, according to an analysis by the Department of Revenue, by not expanding Medicaid, Wisconsinites will pay over a billion a year to support the expansion in other states, without seeing any financial benefit or return. Wisconsin taxpayers will bear this cost regardless.

The financial benefits of the Medicaid Expansion are clear and indisputable; but the impact it will have on the health of our state is what is truly remarkable. Wisconsin would have been able to cover an additional 82,000 people, while protecting the 1.2 million residents who already rely on the program for high quality care. Additionally, Wisconsin would be able to use the federal dollars to eliminate health disparities, invest in behavioral health and substance abuse services, and bring down prescription drug prices for seniors.

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From an overall lowering of insurance premiums and keeping hospital doors open, to making incredible investments in programs that improve health outcomes in Wisconsin, the arguments for the Medicaid expansion far outweigh any that Republicans construct against it. That is why Democrats continue to fight for the proposal and introduced an amendment that would restore several important health care programs that the GOP eliminated and bring our federal Medicaid dollars home to Wisconsin.

The second amendment that Senate Democrats introduced was to invest in education at all levels; from preschool to college. After 8 years of massive cuts to our education system, we know that the Republican budget doesn't even come close to repairing the damage they've done or filling the hole they dug. Governor Evers recommended increasing funding for special education for the first time in a decade; a \$600 million investment. Republicans slashed that proposal by 83%, cutting \$509,251,500 from special education compared to the People's Budget.

The amount that the Republicans removed from special education funding, was eerily similar to the amount of the corporate tax credits that Republicans protected, at \$516,600,000 for the Manufacturing Credit. The GOP's priorities became clear as they announced that their current proposal was the "best they could do," and largely ignored the fact that communities are raising their own property taxes in order to make up the difference and keep their school doors open. Once again Republicans put an ineffective tax break, which has resulted in less jobs compared to prior to the credit, before our children.

It shouldn't be ignored that Republicans allowed their own districts to take a hit in the education budget. The GOP JFC cut \$10.1 million from sparsity aid for rural schools compared to the Governor. 83 school districts all over Wisconsin will be hurt by this decision. This is also the second budget in a row the GOP reduced sparsity aid. Last session they cut \$18 million from former Governor Walker's sparsity aid proposal one week after a public hearing on tax giveaways to Foxconn.

Senate Democrats and Governor Evers recognize the importance of doing what is best for our kids. The education amendment was about restoring investments in our

schools, technical colleges, and universities. Great public schools don't just lead to better outcomes and more opportunities for students, they are the heart of every local community and a key driving force for economic success. Democrats want to ensure children are granted the opportunity to receive a quality education in urban and rural areas alike, by investing in classrooms, special education services and mental health care, not protecting tax giveaways to the wealthy.

The third proposal introduced by Senate Democrats, was to restore policies to protect clean drinking water, air, and pristine natural resources. Plain and simple, all Wisconsinites deserve access to clean drinking water, regardless of their zip code. The GOP budget fails Wisconsin. For eight years, Republicans have turned their back on common-sense environmental policies, and this year is no different. In rejecting \$40 million in bonding for lead abatement, Republicans have sent a message that they do not care about the health of our families. Infants are getting sick from excessive nitrates in our water, families have liquid manure coming out of their faucets, and 1.7 million Wisconsin residents rely on private wells and nearly half of those wells do not meet acceptable health standards, it is time to act. Republicans chose not to.

The fourth amendment that was introduced focused on fair taxation. It would prioritize tax policies that benefit hard-working Wisconsinites. Democrats know that we need to create an economy that works for everyone. Time and time again, Republicans chose to put special interests and very wealthy individuals over the people of our state. Democrats believe in giving families a higher tax break, closing the dark store loophole, and putting small main street businesses over foreign corporations. Rather than more giveaways to the wealthy, we need a budget that restores tax fairness to strengthen our communities.

To say that Democrats are disappointed by the Republicans budget would be an understatement. While Republicans attempt to spread the false message that they are doing more for schools, more for health care, more for kids, we know that they are not telling the whole truth, because Wisconsin missed the opportunity to invest more. Instead, Republicans are forcing Wisconsinites to pay more and get less.

This budget is a missed opportunity to invest in classrooms, increase access to health care, ensure Wisconsinites have access to clean drinking water, and restore tax fairness. The People's Budget would have built an economy that works for everyone through investing in communities and infrastructure. The People's Budget would have restored democracy by creating non-partisan redistricting. The People's

budget would have, for the first time in 8 years, listened to the people of our state. What passed on Wednesday, was NOT the People's Budget.

— *Erpenbach, D-West Point, represents the 27th Senate District.*