

# Assembly GOP COVID-19 bill would restrict local closures, pressure schools to return to in-person instruction

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 2, 2020

Assembly Republicans are proposing sweeping legislation to deal with COVID-19 that would pressure schools to return to in-person instruction and place new restrictions on the closures that local officials can order to deal with the pandemic.

The bill also includes a provision requiring the administration to eliminate the backlog in unemployment claims. If certain benchmarks weren't met, the Joint Finance Committee would have the power to cut the salaries of the Workforce Development secretary, deputy secretary and unemployment division administrator.

The 23-page summary of the bill from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau includes a host of changes that would address GOP complaints about some steps Gov. Tony Evers and local officials have taken during the pandemic. It also would give lawmakers oversight of the distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine and place new restrictions on the business closures that local officials can order to deal with the pandemic.

The proposal was released late yesterday after incoming Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, called for using surplus Medicaid funds to address COVID-19 needs with federal money expiring at month's end. He also said his caucus had discussed various proposals related to COVID-19 and had "serious concerns relating to the most effective distribution of new state funding."

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“Wisconsin needs a comprehensive response and Assembly Republicans are ready to act before the end of the year,” said Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester. “We look forward to working with our legislative colleagues and the Governor on bipartisan solutions that the state deserves in this crisis.”

Vos and LeMahieu met yesterday afternoon with Evers via phone.

“Gov. Evers has repeatedly asked Republicans for their plan to respond to COVID-19 and remains ready and willing to work together on a proposal that will pass both houses with bipartisan support,” said Evers spokeswoman Britt Cudaback. “It’s unfortunate that Republicans can’t even agree among themselves on a plan for our state’s response to this pandemic.”

To pressure schools to return to in-person instruction, the bill would penalize districts that provide only virtual instruction rather than in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year. Those school boards would have to pay \$371 to the parent or guardian of a student if they approve virtual instruction in lieu of in-person teaching. The provision also would apply to schools that provide virtual instruction for 50 percent of the semester.

It also includes liability protections for schools, health care providers and others while requiring the Evers administration to eliminate the backlog in the unemployment program.

The bill also would bar DHS and local officials from prohibiting public gatherings in churches and require executive branch employees to return to their state offices by Jan. 31, when state buildings would have to return to normal hours for the public. The provisions on state employees and buildings wouldn’t apply to the UW.

Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, knocked the bill for “extremely politically divisive” provisions.

“Not only do Wisconsin Republicans not want to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, they want to put into law limits on local governments in their ability to respond in the way that works for their community. This bill is politically driven, undermines Governor Evers’ efforts to combat the virus, and ignores the reality our state is facing.”

See the release:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/2020/rep-vos-vos-assembly-gop-unveil-covid-19-lkegislation/>

See the LFB summary of the bill:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201201LFB.pdf>