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Senate, Assembly pass bills requiring posting of learning materials, schools' financial information

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Both houses of the Legislature today signed off on bills that would require school districts to post more information about what they teach and lead to them making available online how they spend their money.

SB 463 would require school districts to post on their websites learning materials organized by subject area, grade level and teacher. It passed the Senate 19-12 and the Assembly 60-38 along party lines.

SB 373 would require the Department of Public Instruction to create an online portal that displays financial information from all school districts starting in the 2023-24 school year. It passed the Senate 20-11 with Sen. Brad Pfaff, D-Onalaska, joining Republicans in support. It cleared the Assembly on a voice vote.

Both bills now head to Gov. Tony Evers' desk.

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Senate Dems accused their GOP counterparts of opening the door to frivolous lawsuits with SB 463. A provision in the bill would allow residents of a school district to sue in circuit court to compel a board to comply with the requirements to post classroom materials. The bill would require awarding reasonable legal fees of up to $15,000 if the resident prevailed in the suit.

After Sen. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, pointed out that the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty was the first to testify at a public hearing on the bill, Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Middleton, said the conservative legal firm wouldn't have to bother fundraising because it would have a field day filing lawsuits.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, argued local school boards already have oversight of what is taught in the classrooms and those elected to serve on those bodies are beholden to voters.

“You’re promoting division, litigation and you’re taking away local control from school boards,” Taylor said.

Under an amendment to the bill, districts wouldn’t have to post teachers’ lesson plans, though the materials available for review would include syllabi, outlines and handouts.

Sen. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, opposed the change, arguing teachers could shield what they’re teaching if lesson plans aren’t covered by the posting requirement.

In the Assembly, Rep. Kristina Shelton, D-Green Bay, said schools are already doing quite a lot to provide transparency to parents. The former teacher added schools also actively seek feedback from parents and other community members to reinforce that transparency and accountability.

But Rep. Shae Sortwell, R-Two Rivers, slammed Dem opposition for what he says is a push to obscure from parents the lessons their children are being taught.

“That’s not transparency, that is not what the parents of Wisconsin deserve,” he said.

Under SB 373, an 11-member committee would advise DPI in developing the portal so the financial information could be posted.

In the Senate, Dems complained that the bill wouldn’t apply to schools in the state’s voucher program, but Republicans countered they already face a series of disclosure requirements.