

Assembly approves series of education related bills

Posted on Wednesday, Feb 23, 2022

The Assembly approved AB 970, which would eliminate income caps for the state's three school choice programs.

The move would cost property taxpayers \$577.3 million in extra expenses, assuming 67,689 newly eligible students would enter the system, according to a fiscal report produced by the Department of Public Instruction.

Along with ending the income limits for the programs, the bill would also eliminate the cap on enrollment for the state program. Those caps are currently set to expire after the 2025 school year.

The bill passed 59-34 with Rep. Joel Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, the only Republican to join Dems in voting against the measure. In an email to WisPolitics.com he said he supports school choice, but he wants to make sure legislation does not put a burden on taxpayers or public schools.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

"I won't criticize my Republican colleagues for supporting it- they are making a statement of their principles," he said. "For me, however, I will not vote for it unless we carefully look at how it is to be funded and all of my questions are answered."

Under current law, the income cut off for the Milwaukee and Racine voucher programs is 300 percent of the federal poverty level. That's currently \$83,250 for a family for four. For the statewide program, the cap is 220 percent of the federal poverty level.

Bill author Robert Wittke, R-Racine, argued taxpayers are asking for more school choices because of issues such as virtual learning, pointing to Milwaukee Public

Schools holding only virtual classes for nearly a year.

“People want choices,” he said. “People have looked at what we’re teaching in our schools based on what they’ve been exposed to during this time. They want choices.”

Dem Rep. Sondy Pope, of Mt. Horeb, criticized Republicans for what she called a racist move to appease school choice lobbyists and villainize educators.

“Your desire to appease the well-funded voucher lobby is now wrapped in this neat little package under the guise of parental choice,” she said.

Other education bills the Assembly passed include:

- * SB 585, which would terminate parental rights over a child if a juvenile court finds that the parent is likely to be incarcerated for a substantial period of the child’s minor years, among other things. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to Gov. Tony Evers;
- * SB 597, which would allow exempt kindergarteners and first graders participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the Racine Parental Choice Program or the Wisconsin Statewide Parental Choice Program from existing early enrollment minimums. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to Gov. Tony Evers;
- * AB 903, which would require the Department of Public Instruction to audit, determine and report whether a school district complied with the state law requirements related to programs for gifted and talented pupils. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to the Senate;
- * AB 965: which would require the Department of Public Instruction to use the components, methods, and formulas used to publish school and school district accountability reports for the 2018-19 school year and granting rule-making authority. It was approved in a 60-33 party line vote, sending it to the Senate;
- * AB 967, which would provide allow charter school governing boards to open additional charter schools if all of the charter schools operated by the governing board are in one of the top two performance categories on the Department of Public Instruction’s most recent school and school district accountability report high-performing charter schools authorized by school boards. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to the Senate;

- * AB 968, which would create a Charter School Authorizing Board and allow the board to authorize independent charter schools. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to the Senate;
- * AB 969, which would require certain schools to employ armed school resource officers, and allocate federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 funding to reimburse schools for costs of employing armed school resource officers. Rep. Steve Doyle, D-Onalaska, was the only Dem to join Republicans in favor of the bill. It was approved in a 61-32 vote, sending it to the Senate; and
- * AB 446, which would require schools to hold back 3rd graders who score below a proficient level on their reading readiness tests. It was approved in a voice vote, sending it to the Senate; and
- * AB 995, which would give parents the choice to opt their children out of school mask mandates, and require schools to offer an in-person learning option for students. It was approved in a 60-32 party line vote.