

Senate approve bills to break up MPS, lift income limits on voucher programs

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The state would break Milwaukee Public Schools into multiple districts while lifting any income limits on its voucher programs under bills the Senate approved Tuesday and sent to Gov. Tony Evers.

The sweeping package of bills would touch everything from the number of districts in the state's largest city — between four and eight rather than one — to permits for substitute teachers. The bills now head to Gov. Tony Evers.

The state has looked at various options to overhaul MPS in the past, including ideas such as taking over the district or putting failing schools under control of a political appointee. AB 966 would break up the state's largest district to between four and eight.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, knocked her GOP colleagues for seeking to dictate how schools in her community are organized when they wouldn't "dare allow me to determine what would happen for Brookfield." She said Republicans failed to work with locals on a real solution to the district's challenges.

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"When you do this in Madison, this is not helping," Taylor said. "You should help create an ecosystem that respects what works, but you've never done that."

The bill passed 19-12 with Sen. Dale Kooyenga, R-Brookfield, joining Dems in opposition. But the lawmaker said his reasoning was different from his Dem colleagues, recalling what it was like to visit MPS as an auditor when the district was a client in his work as an accountant.

He accused MPS employees of coming into work late, taking extended lunches and sleeping on the job. Creating multiple districts would just lead to more administrators and more layers of bureaucracy, he argued.

“It is a building focused on the adults, not the kids,” Kooyenga said. “They’re focused on their pension.”

AB 970, which would eliminate income limits for the state’s three voucher programs, was approved 20-11 along party lines.

Sen. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, denounced it as an effort to “dismantle public education” and “plot” to privatize it.

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.

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 of four. For the statewide program, the cap is 220 percent of the federal poverty level.

The other education bills the Senate approved include:

*AB 122, which would create a “micro education pod” under the state’s homeschooling statutes. It would be defined as a home-based private educational program provided to between two and 10 family units. It would exist until after the 2023-24 school year. It passed on a voice vote.

*AB 446, which would overhaul the state’s reading readiness program and require the state to hold back third graders who score below proficient level on their reading readiness tests. Evers already vetoed the Senate version of the bill, writing in his message the effort wasn’t properly funded. Backers are now pushing the Assembly version with a change to use ARPA funds to cover costs. Evers has rejected past efforts by Republicans to direct how ARPA dollars are spent. The bill passed along party lines 19-12.

*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 passed 20-12

along party lines.

*AB 963, which would create a “parental bill of rights” aimed at giving parents more say over what happens in classrooms. It includes language giving parents the right to determine a child’s religion, type of school, medical care, the pronouns used for the child at school and more. It passed 19-12 with Sen. Rob Cowles, R-Green Bay, joining Dems in opposition.

*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 passed 20-11 along party lines.

*AB 967, which would 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 passed 20-11 along party lines.

*AB 968, which would create a Charter School Authorizing Board and allow the board to authorize independent charter schools. It passed 20-11 along party lines.

*AB 975, which would change the standards for granting a substitute teacher permit. Among other things, the bill would lower the minimum age to 20 from 21. It passed 26-5 with bipartisan support.