

Survival Coalition: Statement on Senate education actions: Negative consequences and missed opportunities for students with disabilities

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Madison – The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations is disappointed in Tuesday’s conclusion of the State Senate session, especially the passage of AB966 and AB970 and the legislature’s failure to use state surplus dollars to relieve chronic underfunding for students with disabilities.

Due in large part to decades of voucher expansion in Milwaukee, students with disabilities are concentrated in Milwaukee public schools at 19.6% of the student population as opposed to 14.2% statewide. AB966’s proposed split of MPS into four-to-eight smaller districts would therefore have an outsize effect on students with disabilities, causing disruption among a demographic that needs extra stability to thrive. The bill would give the details of that disruption to a separate commission, but the final result would reduce opportunities, increase students having to switch schools, and increase cost and bureaucracy. This misguided bill should not be allowed to become law.

AB970, also passed by the state Senate, would remove all income and participation limits for Wisconsin’s voucher programs. Wisconsin’s public schools are the only place where students with disabilities receive the right to a free, appropriate public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA does not apply at private schools, whether with or without a voucher. Therefore, expansion of the voucher program comes at the expense of the schools that are not

only educating the vast majority of Wisconsin's students with disabilities, but are the only schools required to do so. AB970 should not be signed into law.

The passage of AB970's voucher expansion is especially troubling in light of the legislature's dismissal of yesterday's special session, refusing to take up the proposal to invest a portion of the \$3.8 billion projected state surplus to address Wisconsin's special education funding gap.

For students with disabilities, their families and their public schools, these actions represent a disappointing close to the 2021-22 legislative session.