

# Chris Larson: 10 worst things in the GOP budget

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On Wednesday, the Wisconsin State Senate passed the Republican's budget proposal on a party-line vote, with two Republicans joining all Democrats in voting "no." On Thursday, the Assembly acted as well.

Thanks to legislative Republicans' gerrymandered majority, this harmful and downright offensive budget will reach Governor Evers' desk by the end of the week. When it does, I hope he will use his power as Governor to veto most, if not all, of its most damaging provisions.

With such a massive document, it's easy to get lost in the details. As such, I decided to share a list of the top 10 worst things that made it into the final Republican budget. I hope you will take a moment to read through them and let me know what you think.

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## **10) Fails to invest in public transit**

Currently, public transit support is included in the state's Transportation Fund. This budget takes away dedicated funding and instead puts transit aids in the General Fund.

This means that each budget cycle moving forward, the source of over one-third of the funding for Milwaukee's bus system must compete with every other agency for support. This makes it easier to cut transit support in future years, something no public transit system in our state can withstand.

Finally, the shared revenue portion of this budget continues the strange Republican obsession with the streetcar and puts in place a punitive restriction on use of state funds for The Hop, Milwaukee's streetcar system, making future expansions to places like Mitchell Airport or AmFam Field that much harder.

### **9) Hinders efforts to protect our environment**

At a time when climate change remains the greatest threat to our civilization, as evidenced by the Canadian wildfires that have made our air unsafe to breathe for several days, this budget fails to invest in climate protections. It provides insufficient funding for clean water, undercutting efforts at lead removal and PFAS remediation.

Lastly, this budget sticks a finger in the eye of electric vehicle owners by adding an additional \$75 annual registration fee on top of the existing \$100 Electric Vehicle (EV) tax. For Milwaukee EV owners, that takes their registration to \$235 per year. We ought to join other leading states and countries by incentivizing the transition to clean energy – not punishing people who are trying to do their part.

### **8) Fails to make our communities safer**

Republicans had a tremendous opportunity to improve safety in our communities. Sadly, they dropped the ball in a big way. First, they defunded the Office of School Safety (OSS), a bipartisan program under the Department of Justice (DOJ) whose federal funding is expiring this year. One of the main functions of the office is a 24-hour safety tip line, which has received over 7,000 contacts since its inception, with half of those calls coming since 2022.

OSS also funds crisis response teams and trains school staff on how to prevent violence and respond to critical incidents. Defunding OSS leaves us woefully unprepared to prevent and respond to future school shooting incidents. Specifically, it cuts 16 staff positions down to 4.

Republicans rejected all provisions related to drunk driving, including language from a bill I authored that would require ignition interlocks for first-offense OWI and add Wisconsin to the interstate Driver License Compact, which helps keep drunk drivers off our roads and hold them accountable when they move from state to state. Wisconsin will continue to have the worst drunk driving laws in the country.

This budget makes it almost impossible for communities like Milwaukee to invest in violence prevention efforts by requiring them to expand their police force over the

next 10 years, even if there is a large reduction in crime. If they don't, the city risks losing 15% of its shared revenue.

Finally, this budget rejects common-sense gun reform. This despite gun violence being the #1 killer of kids in the U.S., and despite half of all gun deaths being suicides. Background checks, red flag laws, safe storage requirements – these should be no-brainers in our fight against gun violence.

### **7) Fails to attract residents or grow our workforce**

Wisconsin's population is aging and shrinking. If we don't address this, the future of our state looks rather bleak. People like to live in states where their freedoms are respected. This budget continues to outlaw abortion and reject legalization of cannabis, something that is now legal to some degree in every neighboring state.

To help support working families, Governor Evers proposed paid family leave in his budget proposal. Nearly every other developed nation has figured this out. Republicans removed that provision without batting an eye.

It's no secret that our state has a severe shortage of nurses and that UW-Madison has hundreds more applications to its engineering school than it has spaces to enroll them.

Both of these problems could have been addressed in a big way if we had funded building projects at UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee, but neither of these projects were included in this budget proposal.

### **6) Cuts \$32 million from our UW System**

After years of unfunded tuition freezes, pandemic challenges, and sky-high inflation, Republicans chose to cut the UW System budget by \$32 million. This will eliminate at least 188 full-time positions, and will lead to further tuition hikes (and possibly even campus closures) going forward.

Wisconsin used to be a leader in higher education. We've fallen all the way to 43rd this year, and this budget will only make that worse. Every dollar we invest in higher education is a net positive for our state. Every dollar we cut is a missed opportunity to grow our economy, expand our workforce, and develop our future leaders.

### **5) Rejects BadgerCare Expansion**

Wisconsin is one of just 10 states that continues to reject the federal Medicaid expansion. We do so at our own peril. In this budget cycle alone, the decision not to expand BadgerCare will cost our state \$675 million dollars, on top of the \$2.1 billion we've already lost out on to date.

As an added insult, we will fail to provide health coverage for about 89,000 low-income people. That's right, we're paying more to cover fewer people. Since Scott Walker came up with this scheme, we're still the only state to try this idiocy.

#### **4) Eliminates \$340 million in childcare support**

Child Care Counts is a pandemic-era program funded primarily with federal dollars that has been a lifeline for childcare centers across the state. Over half of licensed childcare centers in Wisconsin benefited from this funding, and 25% of them (about 2,000 facilities) are at risk of closing if this program ends, putting 87,000 kids' childcare at risk.

Failure to continue Child Care Counts when federal funding ends at the end of 2023 will worsen our workforce shortage, shrink our economy, and hurt working families. We cannot let that happen.

#### **3) Doubles down on failed private school voucher experiment**

This budget raises per-pupil funding for the state's various voucher programs by as much as \$3,686 per pupil – an increase of 40%. The total taxpayer cost for choice and charter schools in Wisconsin over the next two years will rise to nearly \$1.5 billion. That's a massive shift of resources that could be going to our public schools.

If that's not enough, private schools receive 90% reimbursement for costs related to special education – students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), while public schools only receive 33%. However, unlike public schools, voucher schools are legally able to discriminate against disabled and LGBTQ+ children, something they repeatedly do.

This budget does all of this without adding a shred of additional accountability to make sure kids attending these schools are receiving a quality education and having their rights respected. 30+ years into the program and their "teachers" still don't have to be licensed.

#### **2) Severely underfunds K-12 public education**

Wisconsin is in the midst of a teacher shortage. Public schools have been

underfunded for so long that this year's graduating seniors have never attended a public school in 13 years whose funding has kept pace with inflation.

Even the most conservative estimates from public education advocates suggest that a \$1,500 per-pupil funding increase is needed to give our students a quality public education – something guaranteed to every child by our state's constitution. And yet, this budget gave just a \$325 increase in per-pupil funding each of the next 2 years. Our kids deserve far better.

### **1) Squanders our record \$7 billion surplus on tax cuts that favor the rich**

Anyone who knows me well knows that I am extremely passionate about public education. You may even be shocked to find that I didn't put inadequate school funding at #1 on my list of worst things in the GOP budget. That should tell you something about how bad this tax cut proposal is for our neighbors.

Here are the highlights:

- Makes our tax code less progressive by squishing 4 brackets into 3
- Gives a \$746.9 million tax cut to the top income bracket, and just \$33.7 million for the bottom income bracket
- Married couples making \$19k per year would pay the same income tax rate as those making \$400k
- Slashes state revenues by over \$4 billion, which will force future budget cuts as the economy slows
- Gives millionaires an average tax cut of over \$30,000

Final thoughts With a \$7 billion starting balance, this budget could have gone a long way toward undoing twelve years of austerity under gerrymandered Republican rule. Instead, we're taking half the surplus and blowing it on tax cuts that mostly benefit the rich, and giving much of the rest of it to hospitals, road-builders, and private school operators instead of policies that benefit everyone.

Perhaps one day, when our legislature reflects the will of the people once again, we can craft a budget that meets the moment and expands opportunity for all of our neighbors. Tragically, today is not that day.

*-Larson, D-Milwaukee, is Democratic Caucus chair. He represents the 7th Senate District.*