

# Wisconsin Public Education Network: Statement on the Joint Finance Committee's 2023-25 budget hearings

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The final hearing on the state budget wrapped up on Wednesday in Minocqua, and Wisconsinites from around the Northwoods (and as far away as Superior and Kenosha County) once again filled the Joint Finance Committee's public listening session with the needs and priorities facing them, their communities, and, almost invariably, the children of Wisconsin. The final hearing drew fewer testimonies than the first three but still nearly 200, and once again, public education funding was the [most common priority](#) Wisconsinites raised before the committee.

I get to drive around and see the best of all of our communities, and see all of these farmers, food producers, chefs, restaurants, that give us this tremendous sense of identity. But in every single small town, the school is the heart of that community.

-Chef Luke Zahm, Viroqua parent and host of Wisconsin Foodie, in Wisconsin Dells

Overall, over four hearings, public K-12 school funding was the single most common priority, taking center stage in 168 of 951 total testimonies according to our [tracker](#). Together with pre-K, childcare, and public college and university funding, public education and Wisconsin kids' needs made up a whopping 37% of *all* testimonies — which is to say nothing of the silent support many pro-public individuals received from allies in the room and the many testimonies that have been submitted in writing. (Healthcare, and specifically support for accepting federal Medicaid expansion, was also immensely popular, taking priority in 143 testimonies.)

We are in a crisis. We implore you, help, don't hinder the state of education in Wisconsin. Leaders of tomorrow are created in each of our districts every day. Let's give them all a chance!

-Katie Ostrenga, Director of Business Services, Unified School District of Antigo, in Minocqua

***The quality and clarity of testimony we heard at these hearings was astounding.*** It revealed not only the depths of need of Wisconsin's children, but the depths of passion and concern of the adults who serve them — as educators, administrators, board members, parents, caregivers and concerned taxpayers. Story after story brought to life what these needs really mean to local students, and there is something both inspiring and heartbreaking about watching these dedicated people take an entire day out of their lives for a two-minute chance to beg the state to align their budget priorities to the needs of our students and the public schools that have been so underserved by previous budgets and a state funding formula that perpetuates a system of “haves” and “have nots.”

I see the \$7 billion we currently have in our state coffers and I see the opportunity to mend the broken hearts, invest in our schools and communities, and build a strong future for every child in Wisconsin.

-Sandy Whisler, retired educator, Lake Mills and president, Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, in Wisconsin Dells

The common threads across all this testimony was clear as day: fund special education. Get spendable aid into classrooms. Get serious about addressing mental health needs, resources for students in poverty, raising the low revenue limit ceiling, closing the gaps for the districts that have for too long been forced to make do with less than others.

It's worth noting, too, that despite much commentary to the contrary, none of these demands are “partisan.” While they all feature prominently in Governor Evers's budget proposal that was enthusiastically supported at these hearings, these priorities are not new: they simply allocate funds toward the categories of need identified five years ago by the bipartisan, Republican-led Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding. It's time to put our money where our needs are and do right by Wisconsin kids.

We call on lawmakers to demonstrate that they heard these pleas and that they care, too. We have an historic opportunity to put forward a budget that allows us to break the cycle of a crisis that has become our status quo. With public opinion this clear, available funds this abundant, and a plan already on the table, there's no excuse for doing otherwise.

Public schools are still one of the only remaining entities in our community where all are welcomed and all are served.

-Mike Jones, President, Madison Teachers Incorporated, in Wisconsin Dells

As the process moves to the next stage — the committee intends to move forward on drafting a budget bill for the full legislature early next week — the coming weeks are critical for public school advocates. It's time to connect with [our own lawmakers](#) across the state to tell our local stories and make sure they know what's at stake for local students. This is about meeting kids' needs and providing them with the conditions it takes to thrive in our public schools.

Contact them in writing. Set up a real meeting with them in person. Continue our shared project of being budget ambassadors by expanding participation in this process: share our tracker far and wide and invite the individuals you know to join the chorus of public education champions speaking up across Wisconsin. The Joint Finance Committee hearings have concluded, but it's not too late to get involved.

Let your lawmakers know what local kids' needs are, and let them know you, your friends, your colleagues and your neighbors will be watching their votes to hold them accountable for hearing the message and meeting those needs. The urgency has never been greater, and neither has the opportunity. All it takes now is political will.

**TAKE ACTION: Visit [WisconsinNetwork.org/budget](https://WisconsinNetwork.org/budget) to follow our analysis and read more about the budget process and what's at stake for Wisconsin kids. Sign our petition to become a budget ambassador [here](#).**