

# Budget votes on education funding likely to play a role in races for competitive Senate districts

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*By Clara Strecker for WisPolitics-State Affairs*

Democrats are vowing to make education funding a centerpiece of their campaign to retake control of the state Senate next fall.

But they may have to message the issue somewhat differently for their top targets.

Of the four Republican lawmakers running in the target seats next fall, three voted for the state budget, including Sen. Howard Marklein, R-Spring Green, a co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee and key architect of the spending plan. The budget Republicans sent to Democratic Gov. Tony Evers included over \$500 million more in state funding for local special education costs, but no new state money for general aids.

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Marklein said state money set aside for public K-12 schools “continues to be the largest expenditure in our state budget.” But Rep. Jenna Jacobson, D-Oregon, who is seeking a run against Marklein, said the budget left school districts in the 17th SD wanting more. Without more state aid, schools have been increasingly turning to taxpayers via referendum.

“When I’m talking to folks, [education funding] is a huge component of it, and the fact that he wrote it, I mean, he’ll have to speak to that on his own, in his own way,” Jacobson said. “But people are very concerned about this school funding and how it’s going to affect their kids’ education, how it’s going to affect property taxes and what is the compounding effects going forward.”

Marklein touted education wins in this budget cycle, including increased funding for special education and school-based mental health services.

“Year-after-year during my time as Co-Chair of the Joint Finance Committee, we have made historic investments in our kids and public schools and we will continue to do so,” Marklein said in a statement to WisPolitics this month. “Our bipartisan budget, negotiated with and signed by Governor Evers during the ‘Year of the Kid,’ provided more than \$550 million in special education reimbursement, funding for literacy, and school-based mental health services.”

Although it passed with bipartisan support, Democrats say education funding in the 2025-27 budget is inadequate. A year out from the elections, Democrats are vowing to use the issue as a focal point in their push to flip control of the chamber for the first time in more than a dozen years. Republicans currently hold an 18-15 edge after Dems chipped away at a 22-11 majority during the 2024 election cycle after new maps were put in place.

Based on previous voting patterns, four seats are considered competitive on the 2026 fall ballot. One of the four seats is held by a Democrat, while the other three are held by the GOP. Democrats need to win any combination of three to retake control of the chamber.

The four seats include:

- Brookfield Republican Rob Hutton’s 5th SD, currently deemed the most “flippable” district. Dem Kamala Harris won it by 6 percentage points in last fall’s presidential election, while Dem U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin took more votes there than her GOP opponent by 5 percentage points. Hutton, the only Republican in a competitive district who voted against the budget, hasn’t publicly indicated if he will seek reelection. State Rep. Robyn Vining, D-Wauwatosa, and Sarah Harrison, a community advocate and small business owner who ran for a deep red Assembly seat in 2024, have registered to run. The State Senate Democratic Committee has endorsed Vining.
- Marklein’s 17th SD, where Harris won by 1.1 percentage points and Baldwin won by 4.7 points. Marklein voted for the budget. He has also not yet announced if he will run for reelection, though he had a fundraiser Oct. 16 with donations that ranged from \$50 to attend to \$2,000 to be a “gold” sponsor. Senate Dems are backing Jacobson in the race, though two other Dems have also filed to run: small business owner Lisa White and former daycare provider

Corrine Hendrickson.

- Racine Republican Sen. Van Wanggaard's 21st SD, where Harris won by 1.3 percentage points and Baldwin won by 2.3 points. Wanggaard, who voted for the budget, has said he will decide by year's end whether to seek reelection. Former Racine Ald. Trevor Jung has filed to run with the backing of Senate Dems.
- Brunswick Dem Sen. Jeff Smith's 31st SD, where Harris won the district by 2.2 percentage points and Baldwin by 4.8 points. GOP state Sen. Jesse James was drawn into the 31st under the new maps, but moved into an apartment in the 23rd that he was elected to in 2022. He has since announced plans to run for the 31st against Smith. Both lawmakers voted for the budget.

## **Voters concerned about property taxes, even as they back referendums**

While Democrats are pushing a boost in state aid to schools, a state GOP spokesperson said Republicans are focused on lowering taxes.

When signing the 2023-25 state budget, Evers used his partial veto power to extend by 400 years an annual increase in the cap on what schools can spend between state aid and local taxes. With no additional state money being pumped into the formula, schools can levy more in property taxes to spend up to the limit.

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimated after the budget was signed that the property tax bill for the mythical median-valued home would go up \$173 on the bills sent out in December. That comes on the heels of a \$182 increase last year.

The latest results from the Marquette University Law School [Poll](#) suggest voters are growing weary of rising property tax bills.

Released Wednesday, the survey found 56% of registered voters said it was more important to reduce property taxes, while 44% said they backed increasing spending on public schools. From 2015 through November 2022, respondents had consistently backed more funding for schools as a priority over reducing property taxes. But that flipped starting in June 2023.

The poll also found for the first time that a majority of respondents said they'd be inclined to vote against a referendum to increase taxes for schools. Since the question was first asked in 2016, voters have consistently favored a referendum. But in the October poll, 57% were opposed, while 43% said they'd vote for one.

Voters this spring approved 53 school referendums totaling \$950.8 million, the highest since 1990 for an off-year election, according to the [Wisconsin Policy Forum](#). A [separate report](#) from the group showed districts in 2024 put forth a record 241 referendums, with a record 169 totaling \$4.4 billion approved.

“Wisconsinites want common-sense solutions and lower taxes. Democrats, including Evers, created a 400-year property tax hike, and they will only continue to increase taxes for every Wisconsinite,” WisGOP spokesperson Anika Rickard said. “Republicans are focused on delivering lower taxes for Wisconsin families and keeping money in voters’ pockets.”

A spokesperson for the State Senate Democratic Committee also said the budget will “absolutely” play a role in the upcoming midterm elections, and specifically pointed to Marklein who he said has the power to drive state funds but refuses to “adequately” fund public education, health care and housing costs.

The state Department of Public Instruction [announced](#) last week that 71% of public school districts will receive less funding this year compared to the 2024-25 school year.

“What is going to really lay groundwork for these competitive races, is that voters are going to have a choice between the way things have been with a Republican-controlled legislature... versus Democratic candidates and Democratic senators, who are offering a different and new and more affordable way forward,” SSDC spokesperson Will Karcz said.

Vining, who is seeking to run against Hutton, voted against the budget. She said it didn’t include multiple items she was hoping for, such as enough funding for public education. Vining also said the budget didn’t provide sufficient access to health care and didn’t address gun violence.

Vining stressed that she wants voters to see what Democrats having the majority would mean — more conversations about putting together a state budget with funding for public education, affordable housing, health care and mental health and addressing gun violence.

“I don’t want to negotiate another state budget on a Republican playing field. There were good things in that budget and there were serious deficiencies. The deficiencies in that state budget are because we were negotiating on a Republican

playing field,” Vining said.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum found state spending on K-12 education dropped to No. 26 in the nation in 2023 after being No. 11 in 2002. Despite spending still being at an all-time high when adjusting for inflation, with spending per pupil on pre K-12 education increasing 2.4% since 2002, the report said public sentiment is shifting, with more voters worried about keeping property taxes down rather than putting more money into public schools.

### **Incumbents defend budget votes**

Hutton, the only GOP senator in a competitive district to vote against the budget, said in a statement he opposed the document. The budget included more than \$1.5 billion in tax cuts, and Hutton said while he supports breaks for Wisconsinites, he believes the document “leverages” former vetoes by Evers on tax cut proposals to “hide” spending increases.

“In a time of economic uncertainty, when our spending decisions warrant further restraint and discernment we need a budget that creates proper spending priorities and puts taxpayers first,” he said in a [statement](#) directly after the budget passed.

Wanggaard, 73, last week pushed back against rumors suggesting he won’t seek reelection, saying he will make a final decision at the end of the year. Wanggaard said he backed the budget because it invests in state priorities, pointing to tax cuts and the path to the closure of Lincoln Hills and Green Bay Correctional when defending his vote.

“This budget isn’t perfect. No budget is. This budget lives within our means, grows our economy and invests in core priorities,” Wanggaard said in a statement.

Smith, the only Dem incumbent defending a competitive district, said he voted for the budget because he supports some items negotiated that made the spending plan better. Among those are funding for special education and the \$256 million in additional state aid the Universities of Wisconsin received — the largest increase in about two decades but a significant decrease from the UW System’s \$855 million request.

“We came up way short on child care. But again, we negotiated from zero that the Republicans were going to allow for child care to \$300 million over this budget,”

Smith said. “The truth is, people are disappointed with this budget, and I don’t blame them, overall, so I’m not so sure it’s something we really want to brag about.”

Smith added that Republicans came to the table to negotiate “for the first time in over a decade” possibly meaning that they were concerned about the next election, hoping that this change is “for the better.”

James said in a statement to WisPolitics this month that he was “pleased” with the final state budget, calling it the most bipartisan budget he has seen throughout his career in the Legislature. He noted there was a lot of “give and take” through the process leaving everyone wanting a little more, which he called “healthy politics.”

“It was never a question that I would support and run on this budget when it provided the largest increase in special education funding ever (over \$500 million), \$1.4 billion in new spendable resources for schools, \$7.8 billion in healthcare for hospitals, \$176 million for childcare and school readiness, and \$1.5 billion in total tax relief,” James said. “I can confidently say that this budget delivered for all Wisconsinites.”