

# Co-chair says 'nothing wrong' with DPI water park conference as Joint Finance releases \$1.75 million to agency

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The GOP-run Joint Finance Committee today released \$1.75 million to DPI for operations costs — \$250,000 less than what the agency had requested — after earlier putting off a vote amid questions about an agency conference at a Wisconsin Dells water park resort.

Co-chair Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, told WisPolitics after the vote committee members had sent a series of questions to the agency about the \$368,885 spent on the four-day conference in June 2024 to discuss overhauling student performance benchmarks. Born said GOP committee members concluded it was a “routine conference.”

“There’s nothing wrong with hosting a conference at a Wisconsin conference center and supporting Wisconsin tourism as well,” Born said.

Going into today’s vote, the Department of Public Instruction had warned it would have to consider laying off staff, delay recruitment for open positions, and continue to restrict travel and professional development opportunities if the committee refused to release the \$1 million in annual funding.

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DPI Deputy State Superintendent Tom McCarthy told WisPolitics after the vote that the agency believed it could absorb the reduced operating expenses without layoffs or delaying recruitment.

“Any time you get this close to having to do something like that, I do think it impacts staff morale,” McCarthy said. “But I feel that we’re in a good spot with the Joint Finance Committee, the co-chairs, so hopefully this is a water-under-the-bridge moment where we move along and make sure we’re serving our schools best.”

The 2025-27 budget reduced DPI general program operations by \$1.3 million annually and placed \$1 million each year in the Joint Finance Committee’s supplemental appropriation that could be released to the agency upon request.

The agency had asked the committee to release the full \$2 million over the biennium. After rejecting a Dem motion to fulfill the request, the committee voted unanimously to back a GOP proposal to release \$1.75 million instead.

McCarthy said committee members asked questions such as how the educators who attended the conference were selected, historical information on past conferences and a comparison to spending by other states.

McCarthy said the \$368,885 was split between the state and federal government, adding the agency has staged similar conferences in years past to avoid having people drive back and forth each day of the meeting.

DPI provided WisPolitics a [breakdown](#) of the conference costs, including \$219,225 for meeting expenses.

That covered:

- \$70,447 for costs such as meeting rooms to accommodate the group, audiovisual equipment and food. The latter was the bulk of that expense at \$55,752.
- \$69,437 to reimburse panelists, including a daily stipend of \$150 for educators, totaling \$52,200, and \$10,491 to cover mileage.
- \$66,342 for lodging of panelists and staff of Data Recognition Corp., which has a contract with the agency to review testing standards.

The DRC costs included the firm’s preparation work for the conference and travel costs for the 21 staffers who participated.

According to DPI, the overall cost broke down to \$30,740 per grade and subject. By comparison, other states working with DRC over the past five years have paid from \$48,500 to \$94,000 per grade and subject.

McCarthy said Wisconsin is one of the cheaper states that use this process to overhaul testing standards.

“We’re Wisconsin frugal,” he said.