

For immediate release.

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DPI Proposal to Close Special Education Funding Gap Would Help ALL Students, Prevent Need for So Many Referenda

Heather DuBois Bourenane, *Executive Director of Wisconsin Public Education Network, and*
Sandy Whisler, *President of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools*

We applaud State Superintendent Jill Underly for [putting forward a budget proposal](#) that finally begins the process of repairing an unfair funding system that discriminates against students with disabilities and has failed to keep pace with inflation for sixteen years in a row. Dr. Underly's proposal to provide a 75% reimbursement in 2026 and 90% in 2027 would be a huge step forward after decades of inadequate funding and a reimbursement rate that has been called "worst in the nation" by education experts.

For years, school and district leaders, teachers, parents, and disability rights advocates have begged the state to address the moral hypocrisy and fiscal irresponsibility of failing to fund special education in public schools while guaranteeing funds for schools that don't even have to provide for the needs of those students.

The single most powerful thing we can do in the next state budget is close the special education funding gap. Wisconsin is *already* covering them, just in the most irresponsible and inequitable way: by forcing districts to fill in the gaps by using general funds that would otherwise be used to cover essential teaching and learning costs. By providing public schools the same 90% reimbursement rate provided to private voucher schools for students receiving a Special Needs Voucher, the legislature would free up over \$1.16 billion a year in unreimbursed special education costs. Coupling this increase with significant, spendable state aid and holding the line on voucher and independent charter spending gives districts the freedom and local control they need to put kids' priorities first instead of forcing costs onto local property taxpayers.

Closing this gap would be transformational: freeing up funds to allow for local control of spending priorities, benefiting every public school and every student in the state, and finally breaking the cycle that forces local property taxpayers to pick up the slack through school referenda.

On Tuesday, voters all over the state proved once again that public education is a valued investment for all of Wisconsin, as red and blue voters alike voted overwhelmingly to support local schools, passing 78% of the record number of referenda questions in 120 districts. The total price tag of these local tax increases was \$[4.2 billion](#) - roughly the same amount as the proposal put forward by Dr. Underly today. It's time for the state to do its job and fund our public schools.

Wisconsin is sitting on a surplus that was built by depriving our public schools of critical funds. We simply can't afford *not* to adopt this common-sense, fiscally responsible proposal that calls on the state to meet its constitutional obligation to its public schools. We urge Governor Evers and our all state lawmakers to follow Dr. Underly's lead in putting kids first in the 2025-2027 state budget.

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UNITE FOR THE BUDGET OUR KIDS DESERVE

WILL WISCONSIN KIDS GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED IN 2025?



PRIORITY NEEDS OF WISCONSIN STUDENTS (AS PRIORITIZED BY EDUCATORS, SCHOOL LEADERS, PUBLIC TESTIMONY, & THE BIPARTISAN BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON SCHOOL FUNDING):

SUPERINTENDENT JILL UNDERLY'S DPI PROPOSAL:

1. Close special education funding gap (private schools receive 90% reimbursement of special education costs; public schools receive 32% or less)
2. Equitable, adequate, transparent, predictable, spendable, and fair state funding: increase to revenue limit and new spendable aid.
3. Align priority spending to priority needs with adequate funding for: English language learning, mental health support, students in poverty, school nutrition and student hunger, rural schools and low-revenue limit districts, early childhood/pre-K and higher education, and attracting and retaining educators.
4. Accountability for all public dollars and a moratorium on private voucher and independent (non-district) charter spending.



**CALL ON STATE LEADERS
TO PUT STUDENT NEEDS
BEFORE POLITICS IN THE
2026-2027 STATE BUDGET!**

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**DID
YOU
KNOW?**

Wisconsin covers only **32.4%** of funding for special education for **public schools**, but **100%** of costs for 99.6% of the students receiving special needs vouchers at **private schools**, which are not required to meet the needs or protect the rights of students with disabilities.

Public schools spent **\$1.16 BILLION** in 2023-2024 on unreimbursed costs.
The special education funding gap hurts ALL students.



**TELL STATE LEADERS:
FUND
SPECIAL
EDUCATION
90%. NOW.**

**PUBLIC
SCHOOLS
UNITE US**

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www.WisconsinNetwork.org

**It's time to hold lawmakers accountable to
STOP funding discrimination and demand
ALL public school students have the
resources they need to thrive.**

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