



Our Children Deserve Better

At the time of writing this *Viewpoint*, we are waiting for the full state Legislature to take up the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee's K-12 package. The proposal on the table modestly increases funding for schools in the next biennium while reshaping public education for years to come.

If it comes to fruition, legislators should be thanked for finding the resources to eliminate the governor's proposed cut to K-12 education and allowing a small increase in the second year of the biennium. However, much of the proposed package should give school board members, administrators, parents and taxpayers cause for concern.

It dramatically expands private school vouchers; creates a special education voucher program; expands the authorizers of independent charter schools; revamps the state assessment, accountability, and licensure systems; transfers authority for certain low-performing Milwaukee public schools to a county-appointed commissioner; reshapes the Racine School Board, and more.

State lawmakers clearly heard the outcry over cutting public school funding. However, Wisconsin still stands to lose ground. The proposed zero increase in 2015-16 and roughly 1 percent increase in 2016-17 will not allow districts to keep pace with inflation and more

cuts loom. In the end, this budget likely will result in Wisconsin falling below the national average in per-pupil funding for the first time as the vast majority of other states increase funding for public schools by 4 to 4.5 percent per year. Our children deserve better.

Further, state lawmakers have not heeded the call to minimize disruptions to the state assessment and accountability systems or minimize the impact of private school vouchers.

They are now looking at seeking a federal waiver to allow up to five state assessments and implementing a "star" rating for schools. Regardless of where these issues end up within the Legislature, state assessments and school accountability measures will likely continue to be subject to revision and changes. In all likelihood, it will be years before districts have a reliable, consistent state assessment system to produce meaningful data. Our children deserve better.

The proposed changes to teacher licensure — essentially the elimination of any standards for many middle and high school teachers — would drop Wisconsin to having the weakest standards of any state. Our children deserve better.

And, unfortunately, state lawmakers continue to create additional opportunities for public school resources to be transferred to private schools and private charter manage-

ment companies. In addition to expanding vouchers, creating a special education voucher program, and expanding the authorizers of independent charter schools, the Joint Finance Committee has recommended that each year up to five of the lowest performing public schools in Milwaukee be handed over to a "commissioner" appointed by the Milwaukee County Executive. Similar "takeover commissioners" would be established in other districts that meet certain criteria — currently Madison, Green Bay and Racine meet two of the three criteria to qualify for a takeover of selected schools.

Details are still being worked out, but clearly the intentions are to turn over the governance of public schools to independent charter school boards and private school operators to the maximum extent possible.

It's very important to remember that public school districts retain their constitutional obligation to educate all of the students in their districts even if their public schools are handed over to private operators, as is proposed in Milwaukee.

We should be advancing public policies that support investment in our public school students, their teachers and their facilities. By nearly any measure, the budget proposal adopted by the Joint Finance Committee should be given a failing grade. Our children deserve better. ■

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