



ADVOCACY AND GOVERNMENT RELATIONS



Setting the Record Straight *Countering Misleading Narratives About Wisconsin's Public Schools*

Public schools have always drawn both passionate supporters and skeptics, but today's polarized climate has intensified that discussion considerably.

As public institutions, schools are rightly held accountable by their communities. But honest dialogue is increasingly crowded out by misleading claims — cherry-picked statistics that spread easily on social media, in news coverage, and at board and referendum meetings across the state.

Public education advocates need to be ready to respond. WASB has prepared this "myth-busting" guide to help board members, administrators, and advocates address these narratives head-on in an effort to set the record straight. The talking points here are a starting point — they'll be most persuasive when paired with your own local data and stories. Use them, build on them, and help make the case for Wisconsin's public schools.

What Issues Will We Tackle in This Paper?

- What are the differences in cost and outcomes between public and voucher schools?
- Are public school expenditures and revenues at an all-time high?
- Why are schools adding more staff while students are declining, and does this signal referendums are unnecessary?
- How did schools spend COVID money?
- Are public schools or private schools better for educational opportunities?



**Claim
#1**

When accounting and adjusting for different levels of income, students with disabilities, and English learners, private voucher schools deliver better student achievement than public schools with less money.

Setting the Record Straight

Cost-Effectiveness

- Assertions about cost-effectiveness ignore that public schools have certain costs mandated upon them that private schools do not. These include pupil transportation costs (including the costs of transporting voucher pupils), special education costs, and pension (WRS) costs, to name a few. Private schools have none of these costs mandated upon them. While some of these costs are partially reimbursed by the state (transportation aid, special education categorical aid) this reimbursement is nowhere near adequate enough to cover these costs – meaning districts pick up a large portion of the tab themselves.

Sources: [Transportation](#); [Special Education](#); [WRS Pension Costs](#)

- Reports on the cost effectiveness of private voucher systems only include details of their public financing. These reports give no consideration to the funding these schools collect through private donations or tuition.
- Many costs incurred by public schools are not solely reserved for public students. For instance, public schools are responsible for creating and assessing IEPs (individualized educational plans for special education students) and transporting private voucher students. Furthermore, in many instances, the actual special education services for students attending a parental choice school are provided by and in public schools. Home-schooled students also have access to public school classes and extracurriculars in certain circumstances, yet the public school receives no extra revenue for these students. In other words, public schools provide benefits for students across all educational sectors yet do not always receive additional funding for these services.

Sources: [Private student transportation](#); [Special education services](#); [Homeschool access](#)

- One important distinction between private voucher and public schools is the level of reporting and accountability measures that must be undertaken. Public schools have a vast amount of reporting requirements they must undertake both through state statute and DPI regulation. Furthermore, public schools are accountable to the public through open records law. Costs to comply with these regulations are not negligible and a large amount of administrative time and effort is dedicated to these requirements.
- It is also worth pointing out that public schools are not a monolith. The per pupil voucher payment at the high school (grades 9-12) level was \$12,731 in 2024-25, which is higher than the per pupil revenue limit in 171 public school districts in the same year.

Source: [Voucher payment amounts](#); [Revenue limits](#)

Student Achievement Claims

- Private voucher schools do not have to test all of their students, only those that receive a voucher. Furthermore, parents of voucher students can elect to not have their child tested. Any reporting on assessment data or academic achievement ignores the reality that not all students within these schools are tested.
- Public schools must adhere to state mandates and instructional requirements more steadfastly than private voucher schools. For example, public schools cannot easily adjust their schedules to focus almost entirely on math or reading (the two achievement metrics most referred to by education advocates). They must provide instruction in science, social studies, health, physical education, arts, financial literacy, technology, and more (Check out page 9 of this [document](#) for a running record of the curriculum requirements of public school districts). Voucher schools have more flexibility to instruct for longer periods on a more limited set of curriculum areas.
- New mandates such as 2023 Wisconsin Act 20, which created new requirements surrounding early literacy instruction and assessment, usually are passed with little/no additional state funding. These robust new requirements are designed to raise achievement levels, but schools are expected to fit more into their already packed schedules and curriculum requirements without additional financial support.



The number of students with disabilities in private voucher schools is undercounted by as much as 600%. Despite this fact, voucher schools are delivering better academic outcomes for students despite not receiving additional funding for these undercounted students.

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The claim that private voucher schools enroll significant numbers of students with disabilities includes no proof other than anecdotal evidence, which is questionable at best. Yet those private voucher schools have no legal obligation to provide those students with special services unless they receive an IEP team evaluation *from a public school district*. That, it seems, would be the true measure of the extent of disabilities among voucher pupils.



Referendums would not be needed if school districts managed their resources more efficiently. While student populations have been dropping (a statewide decrease of 49,078 students since 2020) schools have been adding more staff (added 2,366 positions in the same period).

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This data does not consider additional context, such as what type of positions are being added. Are these positions teachers, support staff, administrators, one-on-one aides, full time (with benefits), or part time (without benefits)?

Not all positions affect school budgets in the same way. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that school districts have cut full-time positions and hired part-time positions to reduce costs for the same degree of services. The more accurate measure is the number of full-time equivalent employees (or FTE) not headcounts.

How many positions added were the direct result of state mandates (e.g. Act 20)? Federal mandates, additional reporting requirements, and increasing parental notifications, are also contributing factors to the number of staff added since the pandemic. Additional staff to deal with student discipline (which is often requested by parents and teachers) is another driving factor. If staff that addresses these areas was eliminated, would the reaction from communities and lawmakers be positive or critical?

Community expectations can contribute to staffing positions. Mental health needs, social work, CTE, dual enrollment, school safety, technology, student behavior, and nutrition, are all areas where communities are asking/expecting schools to step up. Many of these roles are areas that school districts simply weren't involved in historically, yet districts are now expected to provide these services. This is also not only a Wisconsin "issue." Nationwide staffing levels have increased as enrollment has declined. Responsibilities and expectations are increasing across the country. Wisconsin is not alone in how it is responding to these challenges.

Source: [Staffing vs enrollment nationwide](#)



**Claim
#4**

Public schools do not need more funding and need to begin to explore efficiencies. Per-pupil expenditures are at their highest level since 2000, even when adjusting for inflation.

Setting the Record Straight

Per-pupil spending is a flawed metric for gauging the fiscal efficiencies of school districts at this point in time.

- From 2000 to 2026, costs have increased dramatically. In fact, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) states that \$1 in 2000 has the same buying power as \$1.94 today. In other words, costs have gone up around 94% in a 26-year period.
- In the 2000-01 school year, [DPI](#) states that 879,476 students were enrolled in public schools. In the 2025-26 school year, enrollment has declined to 791,794. This is a loss of 87,682 students statewide. This represents a decline of nearly 10% of students over this time period. A 10% decrease in students at the same time as a 94% increase in costs will without a doubt make per-pupil expenditures appear inflated.

Several costs that school districts incur (and take up a large portion of every district's budgets) have increased much more significantly than costs on average (roughly 2.5% since 2000). Let's explore two examples: insurance and transportation costs.

- **Health Insurance:** Over the past 15 years, Wisconsin school districts have experienced insurance cost increases that consistently outpace both inflation and state educational funding growth. Department of Administration data shows that employee health insurance costs for school districts have grown at an average rate of approximately 6% annually, *even after* districts implemented higher deductibles, increased employee contributions, and narrowed networks.

Sources: [Department of Administration](#)

- **Property and Casualty insurance:** Wisconsin OCI and NAIC reports, along with WASB-endorsed broker outlooks show multi-year premium increases frequently exceeding 10% annually for school districts. As a result, even districts with stable enrollment and conservative spending practices experience recurring structural deficits driven largely by non-discretionary insurance costs.

Sources: [Office of the Commissioner of Insurance](#); [WASB endorsed broker](#)

While costs economy-wide increase around 2.5% each year, insurance costs (both health and property) for school districts increase between 6-7% each year. Considering the overall percentage of a school district's budget that is spent on insurance, these costs drive large deficits in even the most frugal districts. Importantly, these costs are largely unaffected by declines in student enrollments.

- **Transportation:** For all school districts, transportation is a large expense. For some it has an even greater impact on budgets. Particularly in rural and large geographic districts, transportation costs can be incredibly expensive as they must bus students over a large area. For example, in one rural school district (which purchases its own buses as it is a county-wide school system with a lack of contracting options) a new school bus in 2006 was \$59,479. By 2025, a new school bus cost the district \$127,383, a 114% increase in price. Over the same time, the average cost of goods increased 60%.

Other types of costs are essentially brand new since 2000 or have necessarily expanded as society changes. Technology and school safety are two of these areas. Schools faced little to no costs in these areas as of 2000, but they now take up a large portion of the budget and cannot be eliminated. Both have been added with little to no state support.

During the last few state budgets, increases in aid for special education services have been touted by state lawmakers as a big win. However, both the number of students with identified disabilities and the costs for special education pupils have far outpaced increases in state aid since 2000. In 2000, prior year aidable costs totaled nearly \$881 million while total state reimbursement totaled \$315.7 million. Meanwhile, in the 2024 school year, prior year aidable costs equaled nearly \$1.876 billion while total state aid was almost \$575 million. So while statewide special education costs rose by nearly \$1 billion since 2000, state aid for these costs only rose by around \$250 million. This disparity certainly causes per-pupil expenditure figures to appear higher than they would have in 2000.

Source: [Historical Special Education Expenditures](#)

Schools have also had countless mandates and responsibilities thrust on them since 2000, often without any additional funding. These have come from the state and local community

expectations. Costs go up for each new responsibility that is asked of our schools. (Check out [this document](#) from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau that details statutory requirements of school districts. Spoiler alert: it is 43 pages! The 2009 version of this paper was 35 pages.)

Costs for schools are largely fixed, not variable, meaning that even with a decline in students (which drops revenues) many costs schools undertake do not drop. For example, building operations and maintenance, insurance costs, and transportation routes are largely immune to drops in students. Additionally, we know that students do not all get up and leave at the same time. Students are lost via a gradual trickle, meaning cost-saving measures (laying off staff or closing school buildings) cannot always be implemented immediately and several years of student declines must be experienced before they can be implemented. We also know that schools *have* engaged in these measures. Just via one metric, [69 school buildings](#) have closed within the past two years statewide.



Wisconsin's school district's per-pupil revenue is at an all time high, even after adjusting for inflation. These figures are in spite of the declining number of students statewide.

🔗 Setting the Record Straight 🔗

School revenues are generally capped via state-imposed revenue limits. Since 2009, annual increases in the revenue limits of school districts (if any) have not kept pace with inflation. While there are revenues schools can collect that fall outside these limits, many of these aids are reserved for mandatory needs and are not flexible for school districts to use on general instruction.

Sources: [Aid outside revenue limits](#); [Revenue limits](#)

To the extent that total statewide school revenues have managed to keep pace with inflation, it has been largely on the back of local property taxpayers voting to increase their own taxes via a referendum in order to maintain services/staff within their local district, not the state providing more revenue. The state has slowly stepped back from funding its share of education costs. No general aid increases were provided in the 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2025-26 school years. No per-pupil aid increases have been provided since 2019. Furthermore, funding for K-12 has steadily declined as a percentage of the state budget, falling from 43.1% in 2003 to 31.2% in 2024. All of this has occurred as the state has added more and more requirements on school districts. When state support fails to keep pace with inflation, the financial burden doesn't decrease, it simply shifts to local property taxpayers.

Sources: [General Aid](#); [Per-Pupil Aid](#); [K-12 share of budget](#)

This statistic is also compiled by taking statewide total revenues (federal, state, and local) and dividing it equally amongst all public school pupils in the state. This ignores the stark differences between districts, many of which will be behind this average figure. It also ignores the differences in students. Many need additional supports (meaning additional funding) to achieve similar levels of academic achievement as their peers, and the number of children with diagnosed special

education needs has risen dramatically since 2000.

Sources: [Differences in revenue limits](#); [Increases in students with disabilities](#)

**Claim
#6**

Public schools quickly used \$2.3 billion of COVID aid and saw little to no improvement in academic outcomes for students.

Setting the Record Straight

The one time aid was needed to backfill the lack of state funding provided that year. In the 2021-23 state budget, state revenue limits and per-pupil aid were not increased at all. Only small increases were provided in general aids (which falls within revenue limits) and special education. The result: state support for public schools during the pandemic stayed largely flat. This came at a time of record inflation, as supply chains worldwide were affected.

Source: [Summary of 2021-23 State Budget](#)

The lack of state support during the COVID pandemic forced Wisconsin schools to use their one-time funding for ongoing expenses, unlike other states that were able to use their one-time federal dollars to support learning loss and provide additional supports to students during an unprecedented time.

**Claim
#7**

Private schools are able to provide more educational opportunities for students than traditional public schools.

Setting the Record Straight

Public schools have adapted quicker to the shifting needs of students and labor markets. As more emphasis has been placed on technical education and career readiness right out of high school, public schools have rapidly expanded their offerings in these areas. In Wisconsin, the vast majority of hands-on CTE programs, like welding, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture, are delivered through public school districts in partnership with technical colleges, not private schools.

Sources: [CTE availability in public schools](#)

School districts are required to provide academic and career planning services to all pupils in grades 6-12. School districts are also required to provide access to an education for employment program that, among other things, incorporates counseling services, youth apprenticeship or other job training and work experience. Private schools have no such requirements. Educational opportunities are one of the few times the plethora of public school mandates works to public schools' benefit. Being required to instruct on so many different areas means that public schools are better equipped to handle a wider variety of student interests.

Sources: [Academic and career planning services](#); [Employment education](#)