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Oct. 27, 2026

The Class of 2040 Can't Vote. Their Future Is Still on the Ballot.

By Damian LaCroix and Dan Rossmiller

The kindergartners who enter Wisconsin's school doors in fall 2027 will walk across a high school graduation stage in 2040. They don't know what a biennial budget is. They've never heard of a revenue limit. They have no idea that their teachers, counselors, and bus drivers are funded two years at a time by lawmakers who may not be in office when they graduate. Yet their educational opportunities will be shaped dramatically by decisions made in Madison.

Too much of Wisconsin's education debate is built around the next election cycle or the next two-year state budget, not around the 13-year journey these children are about to begin.

We write together — one of us representing the superintendents who run Wisconsin's public schools, the other representing the school board members who govern them — because this moment calls for shared urgency, not separate talking points or soundbites that lack context.

"Record Funding" Isn't the Same as Record Support

Critics talk about “tightening our belts” when it comes to spending. Here's what that phrase often leaves out: Inflation erodes purchasing power, so a dollar appropriated today buys less than it did two, four, or six years ago. The gap keeps growing, especially because per pupil adjustments in school funding have failed to keep pace with inflation.

Meanwhile, the job has gotten bigger. Schools are now expected to manage growing special education needs, increased demand for youth mental health supports, transportation shortages, rising fuel costs, cybersecurity threats, safety infrastructure, and the ongoing demands of rapidly evolving technology — on top of academic instruction.

Record funding should translate to record resources or record capacity. Too often, it just means record headlines. Adding a single dollar more than the previous amount may produce a new “record,” but does it provide a meaningful increase?

The "Non-Teaching Staff" Myth

Critics point to increases in "non-teaching staff" as evidence that schools have (more than) adequate resources. Let's be honest about who that label includes: school counselors helping students through crises, nurses managing medical needs, psychologists conducting legally required evaluations, social workers connecting families to resources, and special education aides supporting students with significant disabilities.

These aren't extras. They are the infrastructure that allows classroom teachers to teach and students to learn. Cut them, and you haven't trimmed fat — you've removed the support system that keeps kids in school and enables them to focus on their learning. Does it make educational sense to put districts in situations where they must continually weigh cutting the staff that help our most vulnerable students focus on learning?

Declining Enrollment Doesn't Mean Declining Costs

Fewer students should mean lower costs, the thinking goes. Yet, the math doesn't necessarily work that way. A district losing students across multiple grades and buildings still needs the same buildings, bus routes, boilers, and core staff. It must still heat, light, maintain, and insure those buildings and buses. While some costs are variable, many are fixed. Rural districts know this well; you can't right-size a 30-mile bus route because three fewer students ride it. Fixed costs don't shrink proportionally to enrollment, and pretending otherwise sets districts up to fail.

Accountability Without Capacity Is Avoidance

Let us be clear: We are not asking for a blank check. Accountability matters. Results matter. Fiscal discipline matters. Wisconsin taxpayers deserve transparency and responsible stewardship of public dollars.

But demanding higher standards while withholding the resources to meet them isn't accountability; it's avoidance dressed up as rigor. You cannot raise the bar and cut the ladder at the same time.

Questions Worth Asking Before Nov. 3, 2026

On Nov. 3, Wisconsin voters will elect a governor and a full slate of state legislators. Before casting that vote, we urge every voter, regardless of party or whether they have a child in school, to ask candidates:

- What is your long-term vision for public education, not just your next budget proposal?
- How will you address the true cost of special education and inflationary pressure on districts?
- Will you commit to working across the aisle on education policy?
- What is your plan to provide predictable, adequate school funding, reduce districts' reliance on referendums, and avoid the need to consider consolidation or dissolution?

Vote for a Child Who Can't Vote Yet

The decisions made in this election cycle will shape the schools and opportunities available to children who haven't even started kindergarten. By the time the Class of 2040 is old enough to vote on education policy themselves, they will already be living with the consequences of choices made today.

They can't vote. We can.

More than 80% of Wisconsin's school-age children attend our public schools. Vote like their future matters more than our next election cycle. Lasting success in education relies on all leaders putting politics aside in favor of a unified, long-term strategy.

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