

## Educators speak out against voucher expansion



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As public school officials speak out about a plan to pump public money into private schools, Democrats are calling on moderate Republicans to make state budget changes.

Baraboo School District Administrator Crystal Ritzenthaler spoke during a press conference Monday organized by state Democrats, saying the current budget bill would create a hardship for rural districts.

She threw support behind State Superintendent Tony Evers' so-called "Fair Funding" plan, which would provide a minimum amount of state aid for every student and include poverty as a factor into the school aid formula.

Ritzenthaler spoke about the district's struggle to improve school facilities, citing \$13 million in deferred maintenance over the years. She said under the current school funding system, rural districts will be forced to decide how to improve school safety, provide professional development for teachers, and meet new performance standards with little additional funding.

"These are choices no school board or school leaders should have to make, because our students today and our students of the future deserve the same quality of education that students in Wisconsin have experienced in the past," Ritzenthaler said. "Yet these are the choices that the Baraboo School District is currently struggling with, similar to many rural school districts across Wisconsin."

She called on lawmakers to remove the voucher system expansion and increase public school funding by \$200 per pupil in each of the next two years.

The state Assembly plans to begin debate of the state budget, with Republicans hoping to fight back any significant changes to the \$70 billion two-year spending plan.

The budget up for debate today would cut income taxes by \$650 million, extend private school vouchers statewide, and reject a federally funded Medicaid expansion.

The proposal would also allow for the sale of public properties, including prisons and state highways, create a bail bondsmen program, change rules for high capacity wells, and remove residency requirements for local government workers.

Assembly debate is scheduled to last all day Tuesday and resume Wednesday. A vote is expected Wednesday afternoon. The Senate will then take it up on Thursday.

The budget must pass both houses in identical form before heading to Gov. Scott Walker.

At least one Republican, conservative state Rep. Steve Nass, of Whitewater, said Monday he

would be voting against the budget in the Assembly for a variety of reasons. But at least 10 other Republicans would have to join him to stop the plan there.

It would only take two Republicans to join with Democrats in the Senate to stop passage of the budget there. Democrats on Monday held a news conference urging Republicans who have publicly expressed concerns with aspects of the budget including voucher school growth, income tax cuts and rejecting a Medicaid expansion to vote with them.

Rep. Fred Clark, D-Sauk City, said Monday the voucher system expansion caters to special interests and has received little support from people in his district.

“I have yet to hear from a single school leader, parent of child, teacher, educator, school board member who supports the current budget — what’s been called a compromise — that came out of a late-night session of our joint finance committee,” he said.

He said private schools should be measured with the “same yard stick” as public schools if they are going to receive taxpayer funding.

Walker has applauded the joint finance committee’s decision.

“We have outstanding public, choice, and charter schools in Wisconsin, and our focus should be on the quality of education, regardless of school type, because every child deserves access to a great education,” he said in a news release earlier this month.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

