

Official speaks out against vouchers

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Lawmakers are expected to vote as early as today on a state budget that would expand school vouchers, but Appleton Superintendent Lee Allinger says the plan

❏ lacks sufficient accountability measures for private schools.

The proposed budget

❏ would allow students from low- and middle-class families to use state education dollars to attend private schools. A total of 500 students could enroll during the first year, with the maximum capped at 1,000 per year after that. Legislative action would be required at the beginning of the next biennium to increase the number of vouchers beyond 1,000.

Allinger said public schools must meet licensing requirements for teachers, educate all students — including English Language Learners and those with special needs — and participate in the School Report Card, which is one element that defines performance. Private schools do not, he said.

“There’s this idea of a double standard,” Allinger said. “If your school has the majority of its funding coming through vouchers ... should you not be held to the same level of accountability (as public schools)?”

The Assembly will consider the \$70 billion biennial budget today, and the Senate is expected to take it up Thursday.

In Madison, State Superintendent Tony Evers joined Senate and Assembly Democrats at a Capitol news conference Monday to urge moderate Republicans to vote against the state budget. Republicans have a narrow 18-15 majority in the Senate. To block passage, two Senate Republicans would have to join Democrats.

Evers and Democrats argued the enrollment caps will be lifted and the voucher program will take more money

❏ from public schools.

“It’s a bad budget for kids. It’s bad for public schools. It’s bad for Wisconsin,” Evers said.

Allinger praised changes the Joint Finance Committee made to the school voucher expansion proposal, including capping enrollment; reducing the income eligibility for the program to 185 percent of the poverty level, or \$42,000 per year for a family of four; and eliminating the School Report Card as a determining factor in participation.

Basing participation on something other than School Report Cards was a step in the right direction, since they were created to help

❏ schools improve, Allinger said.

But Republican leaders in both houses have said they don't want to make anything other than mostly technical changes to the budget, which also cuts income taxes by \$650 million over the next two years and rejects a federally funded expansion of Medicaid.

In addition, the budget cuts spending in the land stewardship program, creates a private bail-bondsmen program, kicks the Center for Investigative Journalism off the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, allows for the sale of public property and creates a new income tax deduction for families who send their children to private school.

Several of the more moderate Senate Republicans have publicly expressed their displeasure with various elements of the budget and have been working behind the scenes on possible changes to secure

their 'yes' vote. None have said they would vote against the budget in its current form.

"That's why we're here, to roll out the welcome mat," said Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chris Larson at a Capitol news conference Monday.

"My door is open to anyone who would like to change this budget," Larson said.

Republican Rep. Steve Nass, of Whitewater, became the first to pledge a vote against the budget. But his opposition alone won't mean much in the Assembly, where Republicans have a 60-39 majority.

Nass cited numerous issues Monday, including a projected \$500 million deficit for the 2015-2017 budget, allowing the return of bail bondsmen and what he called a flawed voucher school expansion because income limits are too low.

Nass said he would be voting against the budget because "Republican leadership is opposed to any substantive changes in their version of the state budget and determined to block any attempts by the rank-and-file members for common sense conservative improvements."

Republican Sens. Dale Schultz and Rob Cowles have been the most outspoken in their desire to see changes in the budget, but several others have also spoken out about certain parts. Schultz said Monday there had been no new developments. Cowles declined to comment, saying talks were ongoing.

"I'm waiting for the Assembly to pass the budget so we can get down to having a solid discussion," Schultz said.

Republican Sen. Terry Moulton, who had earlier questioned rejecting federal money to pay for the Medicaid expansion, said he can support the budget in its current form and won't push for any changes.

"I think I can probably live with what we have," Moulton said.

Larson said Democrats were drafting several budget amendments and would work with any Republican who wants to make substantive changes, although none has approached them yet.

One way to block the Senate from making any changes would be to call a conference committee immediately after the Assembly passes the budget. A bill passed by a conference committee,

which would include Republicans and Democrats from both houses, could not be amended by the Senate.

Republican leaders in both the Senate and Assembly, who would have to agree to such a move, have denied through their spokeswomen that it's even being considered.

Larson said a conference committee bill would be insulting to the entire Senate, especially Republicans who want to change the budget.

Once an identical budget passes both houses, it heads to Gov. Scott Walker, who has the power to make changes through his expansive line-item veto power. In 2011, when the Legislature was also controlled by Republicans, Walker issued 50 line-item vetoes.

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