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Democrats say they will introduce "Fair Funding for Our Future"

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Democratic legislators appeared around the state, Monday, and announced plans that actually help Wisconsin's 870,000 public school children by delivering desperately needed resources to local school districts and taking out of the budget statewide expansion of the private school voucher scheme.

The Democrats are drafting budget bill amendments and stand-alone legislation that would increase funding for public schools, take reference to voucher expansion out of the budget, and hold all schools financed with tax

dollars to the same accountability standards.

Highlighting the event — and others around the state — was a pledge to introduce "Fair Funding for Our Future," the school-funding reform plan offered by [Tony Evers, superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction](#).

At the [Madison event](#) and those in [Onalaska](#), [Wausau](#), Eau Claire, and [Green Bay](#) legislators, school superintendents, and board members characterized the Republican version of the budget as anti-public education in that it takes resources away from public schools and gives them to unaccountable private schools.

In the 2011-2013 state budget, Governor Scott Walker and Republican legislators made historic cuts of \$1.6 billion to public school children's opportunities to learn. That same budget gave an additional \$40 million in taxpayer money to unaccountable private voucher schools, expanded private vouchers to Racine, and dramatically raised voucher school income eligibility to more than \$75,000 for a family of four.

Yet, continued evidence and studies have shown that the program does not produce any better results than public schools and in many cases students perform worse.

[In the budget rushed through the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee in the wee hours of the morning](#) — a budget to be taken up by the Assembly tomorrow (June 18) — Republicans would:

- Expand private voucher schools statewide, a plan Superintendent Evers estimates could eventually cost taxpayers \$1.9 billion a year;
- Force taxpayers to provide a \$31 million tax deduction to subsidize parents who already send their children to private schools — a move characterized as the largest entitlement program in Wisconsin in a generation and one provided regardless of income;
- Increase public school funding by just \$100 per pupil in the first year and \$150 in the second year, despite making cuts of \$550 per public school student in the last budget; and
- Force property tax increases and additional local school aid cuts in many communities both rural and urban.

First and foremost, [Democrats said](#) they would increase public school funding by \$275 per pupil to restore roughly half of the funding cut from public schools in the 2011-13 budget and to start a needed statewide re-investment in public education and its impact on jobs and the economy.

Step two would be to take voucher expansion out of the budget. Not only would it remove public policy from the document, something virtually every legislator says he or she wants to do, but it would also make additional resources — which had been set aside for private schools — available to public schools, many of which have moved into fiscal and educational crises after Gov. Walker's first budget.

They also said their budget amendments would mandate accountability measures for private voucher schools equal to those required of public schools.

Finally, [Senator John Lehman](#), a Democrat from Racine and



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ranking minority member of the Senate Education Committee, and [Representative Sondy Pope](#), a Democrat from Cross Plains and ranking minority member of the Assembly Education Committee, said they would introduce "[Fair Funding for Our Future](#)."

A portion of the audience and media listen to public school officials and Democratic legislators talk about introducing "Fair Funding for Our Future" as a stand-alone bill and asking that voucher expansion be pulled from the state budget.

Evers introduced the plan two years ago and reintroduced it in the budget he sent to the Governor in the spring. Evers, who was at Monday's Capitol press conference, said his plan fixes the state's school-funding system so it is fair, sustainable, and transparent. He also said it holds the line on property taxes while guaranteeing every district gets some state aid and puts desperately needed resources into rural schools and those districts with high concentrations of poverty.

"A budget is a reflection of priorities. Our proposal focuses on one of the top priorities of Wisconsin's middle-class families — a strong public education system," Rep. Pope said. "And our proposal proves it is possible to both make significant investments in our public schools and provide real property tax relief."

Speaking in Green Bay, Oconto Falls Superintendent David Polashek said the Legislature's priorities are misplaced. "This shifting money to the private sector means the erosion of public education opportunities for every child in Wisconsin. If we cannot afford to adequately fund the current education system, how can we afford to fund two systems."

Polashek is also incoming president of the [Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators](#).

Rep. Fred Clark, of Sauk City, said that the budget includes schemes for public education that prove the "Wisconsin Legislature is poised to walk off a cliff."

Clark introduced Baraboo School District Superintendent Crystal Ritzenthaler who detailed the good work her district and others around the state do for children and their communities. She then said that good work is threatened by voucher expansion funded by taking money out of local schools. Schools need technology, they need building maintenance, and they need to increase learning and teacher. This can't be done by diverting resources and effort, Ritzenthaler said, so we should "invest in public schools not the voucher expansion."

Also speaking in Madison were [Democratic Senate Leader Chris Larson](#) of Milwaukee; Madison school board member Arlene Silveira who read a [letter from new superintendent Jennifer Cheatham](#); and [Democratic Assembly Leader Peter Barca](#) of Racine.

Additional coverage can be found at:

- [Channel 3000](#) in the Madison area
- [The Associated Press](#)
- [Wausau Daily Herald](#)
- [Wisconsin Public Radio](#)
- [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#)

Statements by:

- [Rep. Fred Clark](#)
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