



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on March 18, 2011

## Proposed Wisconsin Education Cuts Prompt More Union Anger

Wisconsin's elected government is under fire again from Democrats, socialists, and government-teachers' unions over a proposal to cut some state funding for most public-sector schools while limiting their ability to make up the lost revenue through property-tax increases. Critics decried the measure partly because they believe it will increase the number of private educational options available to Wisconsin families.



The proposed cutbacks in state aid to local school districts amount to about \$900 million over two years — possibly less, according to [some estimates](#). That figure represents an average of around eight percent of the assistance currently provided for most districts.

Some districts, however, would see increases in funding of close to 20 percent, according to an [analysis](#) by the Legislative Fiscal Bureau cited in news reports. The non-partisan bureau [determined](#) that fewer than one-fourth of the school districts would have to make cuts to balance their budgets under the proposal.

For 2011, Wisconsin's state government is expected to provide more than \$4.5 billion to school districts — the biggest part of the state budget — [according](#) to the *Wisconsin State Journal*. The proposal would reduce that by less than \$450 million per year.

Supporters of the plan point out that the cuts, taken together, would only return the state's education assistance figures to 2002-2003 levels. And almost all of the loss in state funding will be made up by [other changes](#) in state government [approved](#) last week.

In an effort to stop school districts from simply raising taxes to cover the loss of state funds, the districts could also see a reduction of about five percent in the maximum permissible school-tax rates on property. On top of that, the plan would end enrollment caps on "virtual" charter schools and school-choice programs in the Milwaukee district.

And for critics of the plan, those are some of its biggest problems. "By prohibiting increases in local taxes to make up the loss in state aid, Walker is seeking to gut public education, while he promotes vouchers for private schools and the expansion of privately run charter schools," [claimed](#) Tobin Reese in a piece for the *World Socialist Web Site* after Gov. Walker's press conference about the proposal. "In this highly polarized state the money needed for social programs should come from a sharp increase in taxes on the wealthy."

Despite the opposition to the cuts from some stakeholders, however, the proposed funding reductions should be mostly offset by savings provided under the recently approved [budget-repair bill](#). That



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legislation limited the collective-bargaining privileges of most government employees while requiring them to contribute slightly more to their pension and health benefits. The savings reaped by local authorities under the new law will amount to hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Overall counties, municipalities, school districts and other local governments will realize more savings than reductions in state aid," Gov. Walker [said](#) about the budget-repair bill. "Instead of pushing tough spending decisions and potential tax increases onto other levels of government, like has been done in the past, I chose a new direction."

Walker also defended his plan for government-school funding cuts by touting other changes in the proposal. "School board officials all across the state have time and time again ... been asking for relief from mandates from the state," he [said](#) at a press conference on March 16. "This budget document we propose for the next two years provides just that sort of relief."

And the plan does have backers even within the government-school system. The superintendent of the New Berlin school district, for example, emphasized his support for the plan during Walker's press conference because it would mean layoffs could be avoided, the *Appleton Post Crescent* [reported](#).

But of course, some Democrats and government-teacher unions blasted the proposals. "This is not good for schools," Democrat state Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts alleged, claiming the budget cuts went too far. "It's a drastic proposal, it's draconian and it is certainly going to affect the quality of education." She also expressed concern that the cuts could "clear the way for an explosion of private schools across Wisconsin," the WTAQ news service [reported](#).

Mary Bell, one of the leading opposition figures and president of the government-teacher union Wisconsin Education Association Council, also expressed sharp disapproval of the plan. She complained that, among other things, the proposed funding cuts would mean government schools could not deliver a quality education.

"Governor Walker's budget is wrong for Wisconsin and doesn't reflect our values," she said in a [statement](#). "He's out of touch to suggest limited state resources can be used to further expand the Milwaukee choice program — all while pulling back on accountability for results in these schools. He's out of touch to suggest that more students should be taught by unlicensed teachers." Some local school officials echoed the allegations.

Agitators from out of state such as Rev. Jesse Jackson have become involved in Wisconsin's budget proposals, too. In a [wildly dramatic opinion piece](#), he wrote that Gov. Walker was proposing to break "a covenant" with students and that he was taking a "sledgehammer" to education.

Predictably, Jackson also attempted to inject race into the debate by pointing out that there are a lot of poor blacks in Milwaukee. He said the increased pension and health insurance contributions would "surely" drive the "best" teachers out of the profession, omitting the fact that average government-teacher compensation in Milwaukee is [above \\$100,000 per year](#) while average income per capita in the city is below \$20,000. Private-school teachers make far less than their counterparts employed by government.

As in other states — and particularly at the federal level — spending on education in Wisconsin has been [growing for decades](#). Meanwhile, student performance has been plummeting or remaining at the same levels. In Milwaukee, for example, the government has drastically increased school funding, and only 30 percent of tenth grade students [were at least "proficient" in math](#). This trend is shown to be true in countless studies across the nation. In short, more spending does not necessarily mean better



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outcomes.

With the federal government's "stimulus" wealth transfers, Wisconsin's government schools were able to [inject](#) close to \$800 million into general school aid over two years, almost the amount Walker is proposing to cut. But with the federal handouts already gone, reality is starting to set in and the funding problems need to be addressed. Government-school stakeholders were [lobbying](#) for still more U.S. taxpayer money even late last year.

Legislators in Wisconsin will consider the education-cut proposals in the coming weeks and months. They're [expected](#) to pass the plan sometime before the end of summer, according to news reports.

*Photo: Wisconsin Secretary of State Douglas La Follette, right, talks with his attorney Roger Sage as he leaves March 18, 2011 during a hearing in Dane County Court in Madison, Wis.: AP Images*

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