



DEMOCRATIC MEMBERS

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

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Legislative Joint Finance Democrats' Intervention Supporting Core Facts in School Funding Lawsuit

MADISON - The Democratic members of the Joint Committee on Finance have submitted an intervening filing in *Wisconsin PTA, et al. v. Wisconsin State Assembly, et al.*, filed by plaintiffs challenging Wisconsin's current school finance system. As legislative leaders named in the case, State Senators LaTonya Johnson (Milwaukee), Kelda Roys (Madison), and State Representatives Tip McGuire (Kenosha), Deb Andraca (Whitefish Bay) make it clear that they do not dispute the facts alleged by parents, educators, students, and school districts across Wisconsin. On the contrary, the facts show a school funding system that does not begin to meet the state's constitutional duty to provide Wisconsin children with an equal opportunity for a quality education. As a result, the legislators released the following statement:

"Parents and educators should not have to sue the Legislature to force recognition of the policy choice from the Republican-controlled legislature to systemically underfund our public schools across Wisconsin. Our filing reflects the reality that Wisconsin's school funding system relies too heavily on local property taxpayers, has not kept pace with inflation, fails to adequately fund special education, and continues to divert public dollars into parallel systems while neighborhood public schools are asked to do more with less.

"Public education is not uniform when the quality of a child's education depends so heavily on local property values and referendum results. Wisconsin's equalization aid formula is supposed to reduce differences in local property wealth, but in practice, it falls short of that goal. When the Legislature fails to allocate enough funds through the general aid formula, districts are forced to rely on repeated local referenda and property tax levies to fill the gap. That means access to school funding depends more on whether a community has the tax base and voter support to keep raising local dollars and less on actual students' needs.

"The Legislature has also allowed state support to stagnate while the cost of educating children has continued to rise. The complaint notes that over the last 17 years, there has been no effort



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to ensure that revenue limits keep pace with inflation, and state per-pupil funding lags by almost 9% compared to funding in the 2002-03 legislative session. Wisconsin spent about \$14,882 per student in 2023, nearly [10 percent below the national average](#), and inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending rose only [2.4 percent since 2002, compared with about 21 percent nationally](#). In the 2025-26 school year, DPI reported that [301 of Wisconsin's 421 districts would receive less general school aid than the year before](#).

“The State has also failed to meet its obligation to children with disabilities. Federal law rightly requires school districts to provide special education services and accommodations, but Wisconsin has not funded those obligations at anything close to the level required. In the 2023-24 school year, the complaint alleges that the State failed to reimburse \$1.29 billion of the \$1.7 billion in special education costs incurred by school districts. That shortfall is built into the funding system itself. Wisconsin special education aid is funded through a fixed, sum-certain appropriation, so when costs rise, reimbursement rates are prorated rather than fully paid. In 2025-26, [DPI used a 35 percent reimbursement rate for the first five aid payments](#), down from the 42 percent rate districts had been led to expect. The result is that districts are forced to cover mandated special education costs by shifting money out of their general budgets, taking resources away from the rest of the classroom.

“At the same time, Wisconsin has dramatically expanded the amount of public money directed into private voucher systems. The statewide cost of Wisconsin’s voucher program has increased from [\\$700,000 in 1990 to nearly \\$700 million today](#). The State cannot keep building and subsidizing parallel systems while failing to fund the one public system that must serve every child, in every community, no matter their need - it is deliberately placed in our state’s constitution for this exact reason.”

The Democratic members of the Joint Committee on Finance agree with the plaintiffs on the central facts in this case and stand in solidarity with the families, educators, and school leaders who brought it. A constitutional promise is not optional. Wisconsin children cannot receive one level of educational opportunity in communities that can raise and pass local referenda and another in communities that cannot.

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