



HOW IS YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT DOING?

HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS OF YOUR SCHOOL BOARD
PREPARED BY THE INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL FUNDING: HOW DOES IT WORK? WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Wisconsin spends **\$12.6 billion annually on elementary and high school education**, with each student getting \$14,737 in education, activities, and food. Adjusted for cost-of-living, this places Wisconsin at the national average in spending and at 17th place among states.

Only **7% of money comes from federal dollars**, mostly through Title I funding (poverty) and IDEA (special education) funding.

48% comes from state tax dollars, mostly to address students with poverty, language, or learning needs and to make school district spending relatively equal statewide.

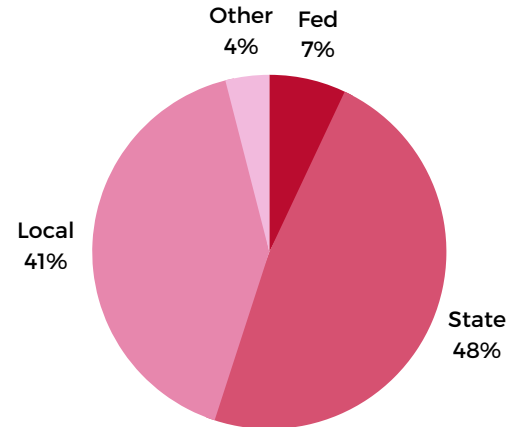
41% comes from local property tax dollars. Wisconsin has set revenue limits for each school district in Wisconsin to limit how much a district can tax and spend on education. This limit, minus state equalization aid, is the amount of taxes districts impose.

4% comes from other local sources. Districts have the ability to ask voters to pass referenda to raise more money.

Wisconsin schools, unlike many other states, compete for students. Students can choose to enroll in another public school district, in which case about 50% of the per pupil amount goes to the new district, or in a private voucher school, in which case the student is funded by state tax dollars, the district loses those state tax dollars, and the district can cover the difference through increasing local property taxes.

\$12.6 BILLION

DOLLARS SPENT ANNUALLY ON K-12 EDUCATION; AVERAGING \$14,737 PER STUDENT



SCHOOL FUNDING BY SOURCE.

ASK: Wisconsin spends about \$442,110 per 30-student classroom. Is your district spending on things that move the needle on student success? Can they prove it?

ASK: While Wisconsin per-student spending has stayed flat over the last decade, a low birthrate also means that there are fewer students to educate. Is your district managing this decline responsibly, or will it be on the hook for large budget deficits?

UNDERSTANDING FEDERAL COVID SUPPORT

Wisconsin received **\$1.5 billion in federal dollars to help students recover from the devastating pandemic** and subsequent policies, with each student getting \$1,853 in extra money to spend over 3 years. Districts with more poverty received a higher proportion of money.

ASK: Department of Public Instruction oversight has not been strict. Some districts have spent on tutors and better curricula, while others have renovated athletic facilities or paid off debt. Is your district spending money quickly and effectively, especially as supply chain disruptions and high employment make action difficult? Is it spending money on temporary solutions, or is it creating a bigger budget hole by adding ongoing costs?

UNDERSTANDING READING SCORES

Wisconsin students struggle with reading. **White students rank 22nd nationally, Hispanic students rank 25th, and Black students rank 38th, second to last.** Reading unlocks all other learning, so mediocre reading scores lower skills in other areas. Many blame a change in reading curriculum. Students used to use phonics (sounding out words) instead of whole language or balanced literacy (using sentence context and memorization).

ASK: The highest performers nationwide have shifted back to phonics, causing a nationwide backlash to balanced literacy. What reading curriculum does your district use? Is it based in the science of reading and phonics? When was it purchased? Are kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders on track in reading?

UNDERSTANDING TEST SCORES AND STATE REPORT CARDS

Wisconsin is federally required to test students in traditional district schools. Students in voucher schools are expected to do the same but can opt out if parents choose. The most public tests are 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 10th graders taking the Forward Exam and 11th graders taking the ACT with testing emphasis placed on subjects including reading, mathematics, science, and social studies.

ASK: Districts often use “proficiency” as a success metric, which combines Proficient (college-/career-ready) and Advanced (elite college-/career-ready). What is your district’s proficiency? Has it changed over time? Are all groups proficient?

ASK: Students testing below grade level are in danger of dropping out of high school, drifting between jobs, or living an unstable and unsatisfying life. What proportion of students are Below Basic (below grade level)? Does your district spend time and resources efficiently to address those needs? Has it changed over time? Are all groups at grade level?

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL SAFETY

The pandemic has diminished student safety, order in schools, and mental health. This has led to decreased public school enrollment, teacher turnover, and lower quality of life for students and staff.

ASK: Do students and staff feel safe and confident in school? Does your district adequately address external and internal threats?

ASK: Is our district providing or connecting students with mental health services? Are parents involved in this process?

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