

Fair & Equal Per-Pupil Funding

THE BRIEF, IN BRIEF

State leaders must ensure that the 2025-27 biennial budget includes a gap-closing, spendable increase in base per-pupil funding for Milwaukee's public charter and private school students, while addressing the unique challenges of our city's youngest and most vulnerable students.

THIS MEANS:

- 1 Protecting the progress made for all students in last session's budget, by not reversing funding levels or undoing bipartisan policy changes to reduce funding gaps;
- 2 Targeting new "core" per-pupil funding to our state's most underfunded students, across all areas of the state, by prioritizing increases in the low-revenue ceiling; and
- 3 Focusing categorical aid increases on our state's most vulnerable students: those with special education needs, and our youngest students including full-day 4K.

INTRO

Milwaukee's families & residents continue to support our city's dynamic, multi-sector ecosystem of K12 schools — with nearly half of our city's students choosing to attend public charter and private schools.

Yet, these students and the schools that serve them continue to be penalized by

unfair per-pupil funding gaps: this year, unequal funding will cost Milwaukee's schools more than \$182M — between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per student.

And, without action, these per-pupil funding gaps will continue to grow wider — returning us within five years to the unsustainable, 33%

to 50% funding gaps of the past that led to school closures, less resources for teachers & educators, and degraded educational opportunities for students and families.

Our state's funding formulas are built to fund systems, not students — and they simply have not kept up with more than three decades of policy innovation and shifts in schooling preferences. It's time to finish the job, and ensure every student in Milwaukee & across Wisconsin is fully and fairly funded — no matter their choice of school.

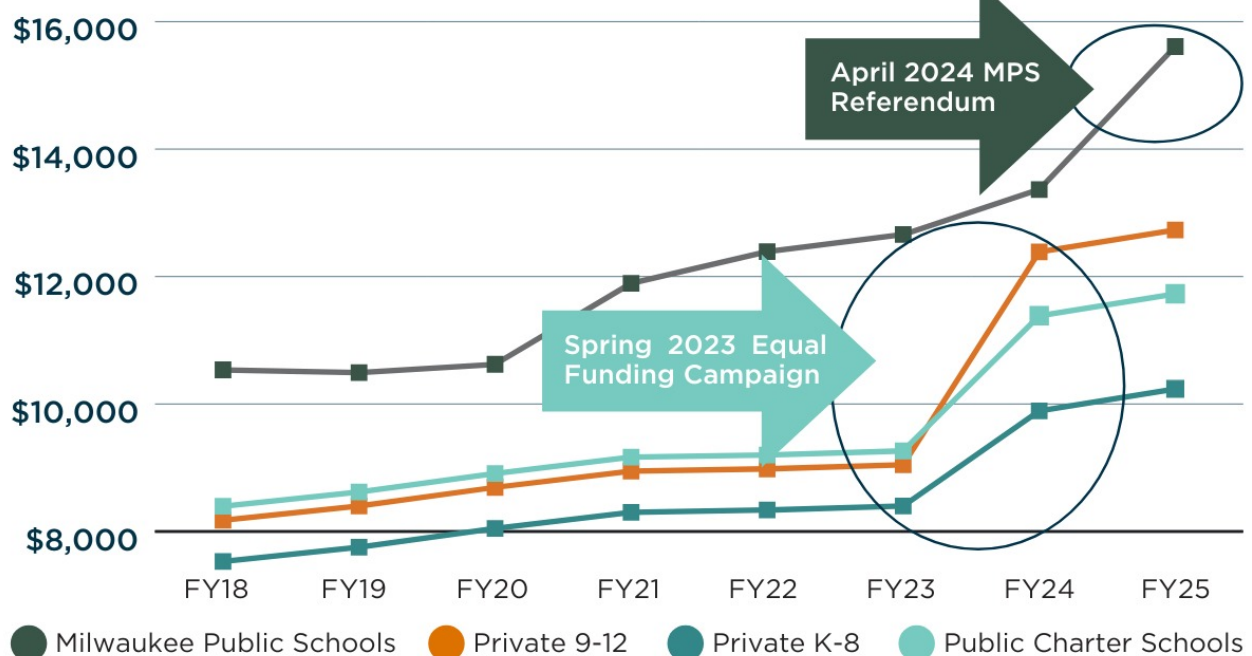
WHERE THINGS STAND: GAINS FOR ALL, BUT UNEQUAL FUNDING PERSISTS

Last session's state budget yielded big wins for all Milwaukee students & schools — but even in celebrating those gains, we noted

the long-term goal remains to achieve equal per-pupil funding for every child. Between the state budget and Act 11 (2023), students across all Milwaukee schools saw more than \$175M in funding increases:

- traditional school districts, including Milwaukee Public Schools, saw a return to 2/3rds state support for core funding under revenue limits, and under current law will see stable and predictable annual funding increases for the foreseeable future
- Public charter schools, and private school students in the state's parental choice programs, saw a generational increase in per-pupil funding, significantly reducing the dramatic per-pupil funding gaps that were imperiling their ability to serve students

Per-Pupil Funding Trends: State + Local "Core" Funding



MPS is one of the best funded school districts in Wisconsin

Milwaukee Public Schools now sits amongst the best-funded districts in the state - reversing a longstanding narrative that students attending MPS schools were underfunded when compared to their suburban peers. The new reality is that with an annual operating budget that exceeds \$1.5 BILLION per year, Milwaukee Public Schools is the highest-funded local governmental entity not just in metro Milwaukee, but in the state of Wisconsin.

Over the past two years, the district's long-term financial position has strengthened dramatically through dual channels:

- **Local Support:** Residents approved two significant referenda—\$87M annually (2020) and \$252M annually (2024)—generating \$330M+ in recurring funding
- **State Commitment:** MPS now receives the **7th highest per-pupil state aid in Wisconsin**

These combined resources have positioned MPS in the top 25% of school districts statewide and among the nation's best-funded urban districts. Currently, 41 cents of every Milwaukee property tax dollar flows to MPS—exceeding allocations to both the City and County.

Public Charter & Private Schools: Real Progress, But Perils Ahead

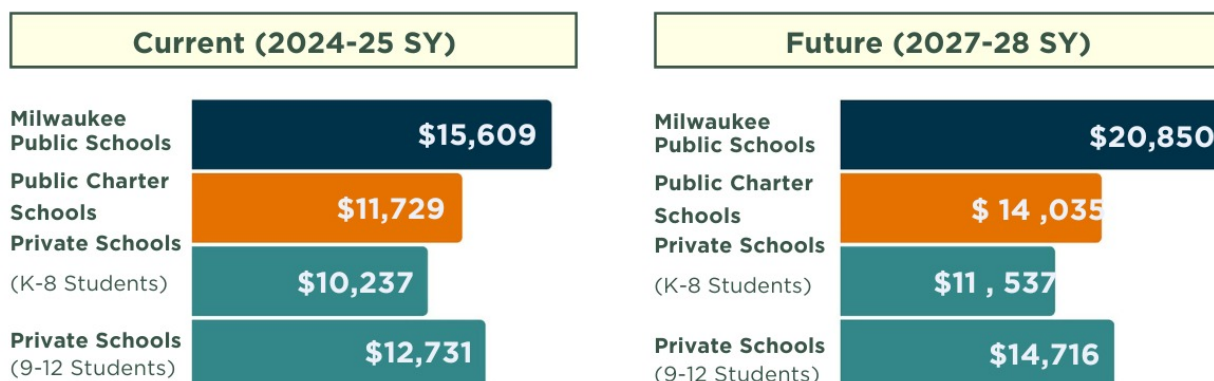
The story for Milwaukee's public charter and private school students — while certainly still much-improved from two years ago — remains less stable, especially over the longer-term:

- Act 11's funding increases moved most — but importantly, not all — of Milwaukee's students over the state's low-revenue ceiling for districts.
- Left behind, however, are more than 20,000 of our city's K-8 students, who attend private schools through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program still receive less than the \$11,000/student that the state guarantees all other publicly-funded students.
- And, while all Milwaukee students stand to benefit from increases in state per-pupil funding under current law, the nearly half of Milwaukee's students who attend public charter and private schools remain locked out of sharing in the benefits from additional local property tax revenues.



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With the 2024 Referendum, funding gaps are projected to grow to 33-50%



WHAT'S NEXT:

In the next state budget, Governor Evers and state legislative leaders must continue the cross-partisan progress, build on the historic achievements of the last legislative session, and ensure that every student and every school — in Milwaukee, and across Wisconsin — receives the fair and equitable funding they deserve.

1

PROTECT LAST SESSION'S

PROGRESS: Last session, state leaders made historic investments in all of Wisconsin's students & schools — breaking away from the tired, old playbook of pitting school vs school and sector vs sector.

Unfortunately, early rhetoric from some corners in this session has returned to divisive and misleading talking points on special education and other funding, and zero-sum arguments

pitting students against students and schools against each other.

Legislators must stay the course, by protecting the commitments made to all students and schools two years ago, and continuing a cross-partisan approach to supporting all students in the next budget cycle.

2

CLOSE GAPS FROM THE BOTTOM UP:

Wisconsin's students face a complex series of funding gaps, depending on the type of school they attend and what grade level they're in. We agree with advocates that the fairest and most equitable approach is to close those gaps from the bottom up, with a goal of guaranteeing every child a base funding level that's adequate for their educational needs.

“Base” funding increases should be focused on students who are at or below the state’s \$11,000/ student low-revenue ceiling. This includes students in rural districts across Wisconsin and over 20,000 Black and Hispanic students attending high-performing Milwaukee Parental Choice Program schools.

3

PRIORITIZE YOUNGEST LEARNERS & VULNERABLE STUDENTS:

Some students face more complex learning challenges, and require additional resources to support their education.

Our state’s youngest learners are not receiving the support they need to enter school ready to learn. We support the full inclusion of four year old Kindergarten in the funding formula for schools, at the same funding levels for students in grades K5-12. And, we support the efforts of partner organizations to ensure that students in early childhood settings receive the funding and care they need to enter school ready to learn.

In a companion brief, we speak directly to the need both for additional funding for students with special education needs, and the need to reform the special education funding system to ensure that those funds are both timely and impactful in improving student outcomes.

THE PATH FORWARD

Wisconsin has an historic opportunity to build on recent progress and create true funding equity for all students. By continuing to close funding gaps from the bottom up, prioritizing our most vulnerable learners, and maintaining cross-partisan support for all school sectors, we can ensure that every child — regardless of zip code or school choice — receives the educational resources they deserve.

The time for half-measures has passed. Milwaukee’s diverse educational ecosystem stands ready to transform outcomes for our city’s children, but only with sustainable, equitable funding that recognizes the value and potential of every student. State leaders must act decisively in the 2025-27 budget to fulfill this commitment to Milwaukee’s families and secure Wisconsin’s educational future.



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