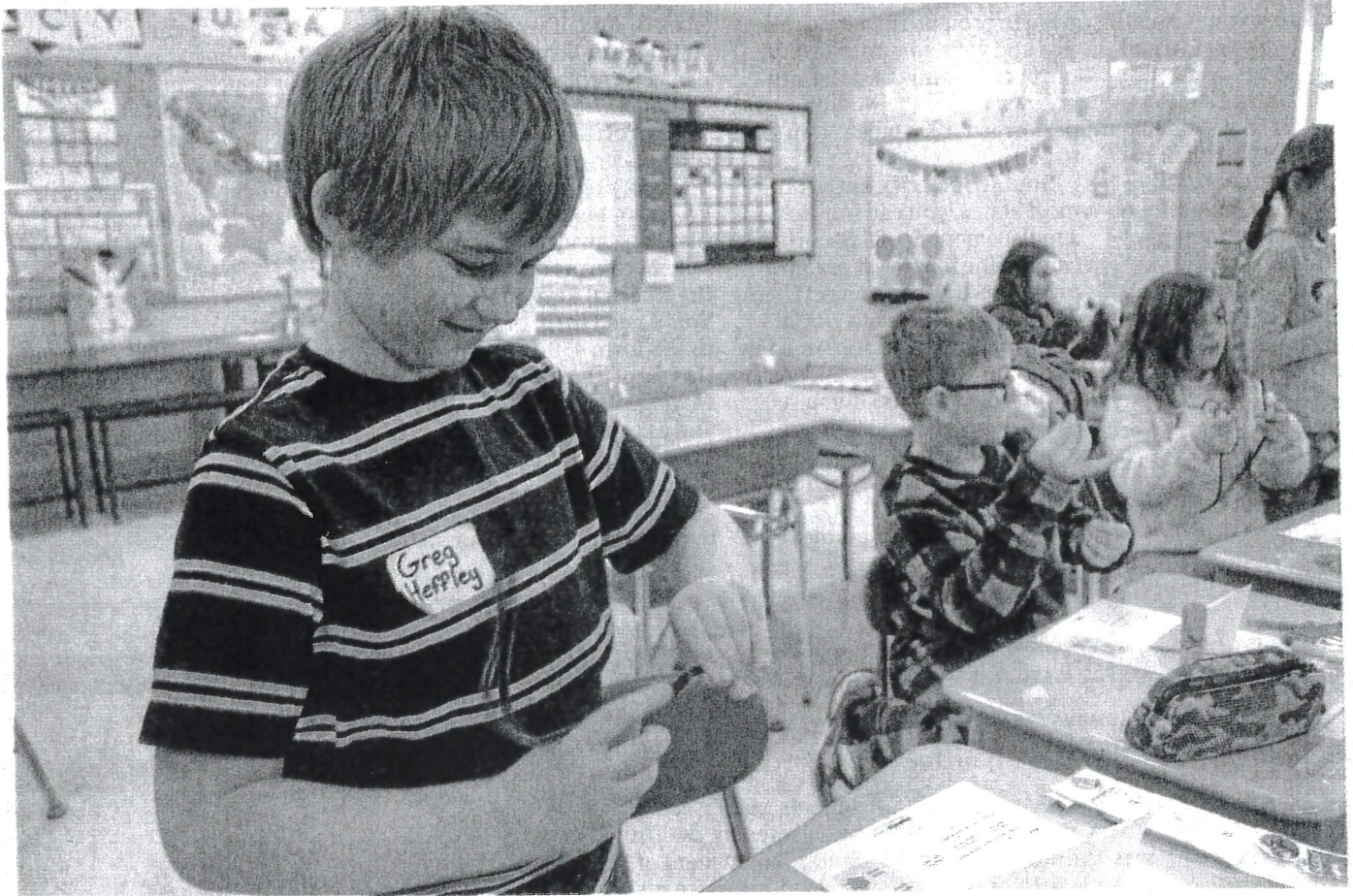


BRIDGING THE GAP



TERRI PEDERSON, DAILY CITIZEN

Dodgeland Elementary School third-grader Kenneth Reffke works on a project. The Dodgeland School District, one of the seven school districts in Dodge County asking voters for additional operating funds on April 1, is seeking an additional \$1.4 million for five years.

School districts seek extra funds with referendum on April 1 ballot

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Wisconsin has seen its share of referendums for additional operating expense in recent years as districts attempt to provide needed services with costs on the rise. In Dodge County, there has not been an election that shows the need more than the one on April 1, when half of the districts in the county will be asking voters to exceed state-imposed revenue caps.

Voters in the Columbus, Dodgeland, Hustisford, Oakfield, Randolph, Waupun and Watertown school districts will have referendum questions on their ballots.

"Wisconsin school districts are increasingly turning to operating referendums to bridge a growing funding gap," Waupun Superintendent Steven Hill said.

"State funding formulas haven't kept up with inflation, leaving districts more than \$3,300 per student behind where they would be if funding had matched rising costs," Hill said. "This shortfall is worsened by declining enrollment, which reduces state aid while fixed costs remain."

Waupun schools have seen an increase in expenses, Hill said, including a 130% rise in property insurance premiums since the 2021-22 school year and a 38% hike in transportation costs over the last four years.

"Special education funding is particularly problematic, as Wisconsin only reimburses districts for 33.3% of their actual costs," Hill said. "This underfunding forces districts to divert resources from general education, negatively im-

pacting all students."

This school year, Hill said, Waupun transfers from the general education fund to special education is projected to be almost \$3 million, which is a 46% increase from the 2020-21 school year. One cause of the increase is a significant increase in the number of students with an individual education program, which went up from 210 in 2015 to 333 this year.

Dodge County schools are not alone in going to voters to seek additional funds, Hill said. The number of school districts seeking voter approval for operating referendums has skyrocketed, with 248 referendums on ballots in 2022, 137 in November 2024, and 88 in the upcoming April election.

Schools

From A1

"Wisconsin's national ranking for per-pupil spending has plummeted from 11th in 2002 to 25th in 2022, highlighting the state's declining investment in education," Hill said. "To maintain current programs and services, many districts have little choice but to ask taxpayers for additional support through referendums."

The Columbus School District is looking to meet community priorities and maintain the programs that are believed to result in academic growth for students, Superintendent Jake Flood said.

"An approved operational referendum has been the reality for many school districts in the state of Wisconsin to provide an educational experience that is expected and what kids deserve," Flood said. "We believe that the root of the situation stems from three key factors: state budgeting allocations, the Wisconsin school funding formula, and inflation. These three factors have created a system where ample funding to maintain programming is less reliable."

Revenue limits were set by the state in 1993 based on what school districts were spending at that time, DodgeLand Superintendent Jessica Johnson said.

"If a school district was fiscally frugal, they still must be based on that year," Johnson said.

"The state has given minimal per pupil increases that have not kept pace with the rate of inflation. Just like home expenses, school districts have experienced increases in expenses for everything — transportation, property and liability insurance, health insurance for staff members, cybersecurity, utilities, and general preventative maintenance costs."

The DodgeLand School District is currently operating with a School Board-approved budget deficit of about \$650,000, Johnson said.

"If the state would have kept up with inflationary increases to school districts, DodgeLand would have an additional \$1.5 million in revenue this school year, meaning we would have a surplus, not a deficit," Johnson said.

"Randolph, like other districts, has faced rising costs in transportation, insurance and utilities, while state aid has remained stagnant or declined due to higher property values," Randolph School District Superintendent Brian Zacho said. "Additionally, special education reimbursement rates remain low, forcing districts to cover a growing portion of these costs from their general budgets."

In addition the expansion of the statewide private school voucher program affects the communities' taxes, Zacho said. The program allows eligible public school students to attend a participating private school.

"Without operating referendums, many districts, including Randolph, would struggle to maintain staffing, programs, and essential student services," Zacho said.

Districts seek to keep quality education

If the referendum passes, the Randolph School District will be able to maintain similar staffing levels, class sizes and educational opportunities for students, Zacho said.

"Essential programs, such as career and technical education, dual credit courses, and extracurricular activities, will continue to

be offered," Zacho said. "The district will also be able to invest in technology, safety measures and building maintenance to ensure a high-quality learning environment. However, we will still need to cut \$600,000 over the next three years even with a passed referendum."

The Waupun Area School District is asking voters to exceed state-imposed revenue limits by \$900,000 annually for three years.

Zachos said there would be difficult budget cuts, which could include reductions in staff, larger class sizes, and fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities for students if the referendum fails. Support services, such as mental health resources and academic interventions, could also be impacted. Delayed facility maintenance and outdated technology could create further challenges in delivering a modern education experience, he said.

The Randolph School District is asking voters to exceed the district's revenue caps by \$1.2 million for the next three years.

"Ultimately, without additional funding, the quality of education in Randolph will be at risk," Zacho said. "We will need to make between \$600,000 and \$900,000 in cuts within the next year."

Without adequate funding, the Waupun Area School District also will face the risk of significant cuts that could impact various aspects of education, Hill said.

"Staffing cuts could lead to larger class sizes, limiting individualized attention," Hill said. "Fewer electives, career preparation, and college credit courses could be offered, reducing opportunities for students to explore their interests and prepare for future careers. Academic support, student mental health services, and staff professional development could be reduced. Athletic and co-curricular offerings might be scaled back, limiting opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular activities. Technology upgrades and cybersecurity measures could be delayed, potentially hindering access to modern learning tools and compromising the security of sensitive data. Building maintenance projects and security updates could also be deferred, leading to more costly repairs in the future. Busing routes could be cut, leading to longer routes and longer student trips. Overall, insufficient funding could result in a decline in the quality of education and a reduction in opportunities for Waupun students."

Waupun schools will be able to maintain current programs, class sizes and staffing levels if the referendum passes, Hill said.

"This will ensure that students continue receiving our excellent educational opportunities and support as they complete their K-12 journey and embark on their choice of future endeavors," Hill said.

Residents in the DodgeLand School District will be voting on a referendum asking for an additional \$1.4 million in operating funds annually over the next five years.

"Over the past five years, as costs have increased and the state has not kept up, our district has continued to make reductions in staff and operations," Johnson said. "We have worked hard to maintain the great programs we have in place, with less. If the referendum doesn't pass, we will have to make significant reductions in staffing, which means some programs will be eliminated, which affects options for

students."

There are similar concerns in the Columbus School District, which is asking voters for an additional \$1.75 million over the next four school years.

Without the added operating funds, Flood said, "There would be tough decisions that would be necessary for reduction of expenses."

"A referendum that passes provides the resources to maintain the current experiences," Flood said, adding, "We are cognizant that a passed or failed referendum has significant impacts on students, staff and taxpayers."

Funding solutions needed

"For school districts to be funded better in the future, we need a long-term solution that ensures state funding keeps pace with inflation and the actual costs of running a school," Johnson said. "Right now, districts are being asked to do more with less, which puts an enormous strain on staff and resources."

Many of the mandates districts must follow — such as special education services, support for multilingual learners or gifted students, and curriculum requirements — come without the necessary funding, leaving districts to absorb the costs, Johnson said.

"This not only impacts on our ability to sustain the high-quality programs our students deserve but also adds to the workload of our staff, contributing to burnout and retention challenges," Johnson said. "Schools that can't offer competitive salaries or manageable workload struggle to keep experienced and effective educators, which ultimately affects students. Without meaningful changes in school funding, more and more districts will continue to rely on operating referendums just to provide the education their students need."

There are many ways that funding for schools needs to be changed, Hill said.

"Wisconsin needs to increase its special education reimbursement rate to at least 60% to better fund schools like WASH, up from the current 32.4%," Hill said. "Additionally, the state should increase the low revenue ceiling from \$11,325 to \$12,500 to help equalize funding between districts."

Funding formulas must keep pace with inflation, providing more general aid to schools, or we will continue to have an even more significant gap than the current \$3300 gap per student, Hill said.

"Lawmakers should also consider the impact of voucher programs on public school funding and exercise caution in expanding them," Hill said. "Ultimately, Wisconsin's investment in education needs to be increased, as its national ranking for per-pupil spending has fallen to 25th. The legislature should review and follow the recommendations from its own Blue Ribbon Commission, which released its report in January 2019."

The Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding in Wisconsin addressed the state's school funding issues.

Zachos said the state must adjust its funding formula to keep pace with inflation in order to provide adequate resources for school districts regardless of property values.

"Increasing special education reimbursement rates to at least 60% would significantly relieve pressure on general education budgets. Additionally, raising the

The questions that will be on the ballot

Columbus School District

Shall the Columbus School District, Columbia, Dodge and Dane Counties, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$1,750,000 per year for four years, beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2028-2029 school year, for non-recurring purposes consisting of operational and maintenance expenses?

DodgeLand School District

Shall the DodgeLand School District, Dodge County, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$1,400,000 for five (5) years beginning the 2025-2026 school year and concluding the 2029-2030 school year, for non-recurring purposes consisting of operational expenses, including to maintain student to staff ratios, educational and co-curricular programs, student behavioral and mental health resources, and technology and cybersecurity infrastructure?

Hustisford School District

Shall the Hustisford School District, Dodge County, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$800,000 per year for three years, beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2027-2028 school year, for non-recurring purposes consisting of operational and maintenance expenses?

School District of Oakfield

Shall the School District of Oakfield be authorized to exceed state revenue limits by \$1,100,000 for the 2025-26, 2026-27, 2027-28, and 2028-29 school years all on a non-recurring basis to support School District educational offerings, staff salaries, and daily operating expenses? Yes No

Randolph School District

Shall the Randolph School District, Dodge and Columbia Counties, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$1,200,000 per year for three years, beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2027-2028 school year, for nonrecurring purposes consisting of operational and maintenance expenses, including for educational programming and facility maintenance?

Watertown Unified School District

Shall the Watertown Unified School District, Jefferson and Dodge Counties, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$700,000 beginning with the 2025-2026 school year, for recurring purposes consisting of operational, instructional, and maintenance expenses?

Waupun Area School District

Shall the Waupun Area School District, Dodge and Fond du Lac Counties, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$900,000 per year for three years beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2027-2028 school year, for nonrecurring purposes consisting of operational and maintenance expenses, including to maintain facilities and small class sizes, to sustain and expand educational programming, and to pay salaries and benefits? Question: Shall the Waupun Area School District, Dodge and Fond du Lac Counties, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$900,000 per year for three years beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2027-2028 school year, for nonrecurring purposes consisting of operational and maintenance expenses, including to maintain facilities and small class sizes, to sustain and expand educational programming, and to pay salaries and benefits?

low revenue ceiling would help level the playing field for districts like Randolph, which are currently at a disadvantage due to past spending limitations," Zacho said. "I would love for lawmakers to also review the impact of voucher programs on public school funding and consider recommendations from past education funding studies," Zacho added. "Without these long-term changes, school districts will continue relying on referendums just to maintain essential services for students. It somehow feels as if the public school system has become the villain in the state when we need to be part of the solution and the hero."

Flood said the Columbus community has great pride in its schools and has always showed support for them.

"This support has included generous donations over the years that we greatly appreciate," Flood said. "Relying on donations can only take us so far. There are a couple of key components to be addressed, at the state level, if there is a true desire for an investment in funding public education adequately."

Flood said things would be different if the revenue limit formula would keep pace with inflation.

"In 2009-2010, when inflation and increases in revenue limits were decoupled, an inevitable challenge was created for school districts," Flood said. "In Columbus, an increase to the low revenue ceiling would help level the playing field. An increase in the special education reimbursement rate would have a substantial positive impact. The common thought is that nearly doubling the special education reimbursement rate would be a good start."

If districts face mandates, Flood said appropriate funding to implement and maintain the programs should be given to the districts as well.

"I think calculated decisions must be made by lawmakers when it comes to the impact of the voucher programs," Flood said. "In the end, I believe that there needs to be some major adjustments to the current system to give communities the support for a great school system."

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