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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** And rolling. Right.

[00:00:01] **Speaker 2** All right. Well, since those revenue limits were put into place in 1994, a whopping 82% of school districts have gone to school referenda, resulting in about 5% of total operating costs around the state being funded by those referenda in all of our schools. But there are about, 100 districts that are currently paying for about 10% of their whole operating budgets through those referenda. And 14 districts that are paying for a full 25% of their operating costs through through that referenda aid. And while that might not seem like a problem on its face, like, okay, those people have voted, they elected to raise taxes on themselves, that's their prerogative. What about where they didn't? What about those districts where the referenda didn't pass? Those kids are doing more with less, and that's a problem. The other problem that we have is the way the revenue limits work is simply unfair. It's it's, you know, random and arbitrary based on decisions that were made in 1994 by folks who are serving on school boards back then, and they have nothing to do with the needs of kids now. And so what Wisconsin really should be doing is focusing on overhauling its school finance formula to create one that's aligned with student need and not property values or or not, you know, arbitrary spending limits that were set by the state and, and instead were just bickering about, you know, whether the state of their local community should be paying a larger share of, of the bill. You know, we're having the wrong conversation, and we should be talking about doing whatever we can to meet the kids needs where they are.

[00:01:39] **Speaker 1** So in that budget debate, one of the reasons that the Republicans justified not increasing any per pupil aides was the amount of Esser dollars coming in from the various Covid relief funds, which a lot of districts spread over three years, because they knew that that money was probably all they were going to get. And even though it was supposed to go towards catching up kids or telehealth or mental health needs, it was funding teachers and other things that backfilling operations. And now they're all ending. So what does that mean?

[00:02:10] **Speaker 2** Yeah. As a parent advocate and kind of an accidental expert in school finance, watching that play out was really painful because you knew from talking to district leaders, from talking to teachers, from talking to parents that kids needs were really, really different during and after the pandemic. There were so many mental health needs. There was so much food insecurity. There was so much, change just in the way we did school. And all of that required resources that even the the federal pandemic Aids were not sufficient to meet. And so when the the state of Wisconsin insisted that districts reallocate those federal Covid funds, not not to meeting the Covid related needs of kids, but to filling the gap that the state was refusing to fill in in general aid. It was just heartbreaking. And so we see today, you know, the impacts of that in our schools as staff is stretched more thin than ever. Teachers are frustrated by the way their districts want to help meet their needs and and provide resources for, for educators and for kids and just can't. And, you know, really, the folks in the state House are 100% to blame for that.

[00:03:26] **Speaker 1** When you look at the voters that are going to be deciding on their local referenda coming up this year, often those same voters are voting for Republicans in the Assembly, in the Senate, that are the ones making those decisions. Do you think the voters understand some of those connections, or are they separating those out emotionally of like, well, this is a school thing versus that's my state politics.

[00:03:49] **Speaker 2** Listen, we know that Republicans love their public schools as much as Democrats do all over the state. People come out and vote for strong public schools. When we pull them, they say they wish to see more resources allocated to public schools. They say they love their local public schools, even when they think there are problems with public education. You know, in in a larger way. And so pointing out the gap between what voters want, what they're voting for at the local level and what they're getting from Republican leaders. And in Madison, I think is a really important missing, missing link here that a lot of people aren't really connecting. And so I appreciate you pointing that out. And my question is why and how are they getting away with it? And how long can we sustain a system that is really deliberately making sure that some of our kids just don't have the same resources and opportunity as others, when we know we could fix this problem tomorrow?

[00:04:43] **Speaker 1** How what what position is a local superintendent in? And I'm going to use Richland Center as an example, the Richland School District. Their state representative is on joint finance. Their state senator is on joint finance. So they are double represented on the most powerful budget writing committee. And yet when they go to the public to talk about why they need this money, they are very hesitant and scared to reference. It's because the other people that are in those power positions didn't provide the funds in the first place, and they don't want to be put in that spot of having to to blame their own direct representatives.

[00:05:19] **Speaker 2** No one wants to play the blame game on school funding. Nobody wants to point one finger at who is responsible for this or that. And it's it is true that this is a complicated beast, and there are a lot of moving parts when we talk about the politics related to public education and school spending in general. But what those folks need to do is organize their communities to come out when their voices matter the most. When we're in the heat of those budget moments when our lawmakers are listening to us after the fact, when the deal is done, we don't have a choice but to vote, to raise taxes on ourselves. If we want to keep our schools open and do all the nice things our kids need us to do. But when there are those moments that democracy affords where we can engage in the conversation, we just need more people coming out and telling, telling their truth and sharing what the needs of their kids are, and letting our lawmakers know that we we aren't okay with just standing by and watching yet another budget sell our kids short. While the state sits on this enormous surplus and somehow unjustifiably continues to to pour more and more dollars into nonpublic schools that don't play by the same set of rules. You know, it's not okay. And more people need to stand up and say something about it. To the point about superintendents, though superintendents and business managers and school boards all over the state have been doing an absolutely remarkable job navigating this incredibly complicated, you know, political minefield, but also the, the, the fiscal crisis that it has led to. And so when I see folks disparaging that good work or suggesting that they somehow, you know, didn't, didn't tighten the belt enough or had wasted spending, I was like, you know, show me the books of any district in the state. And we and we can we can trace this, this tightening. And it's it's really depressing. So, I wouldn't blame my local leaders, but I would certainly be paying attention to the decisions they're making. I would be paying attention to who's serving on my school board. I'd be listening very carefully to what folks who are running for school board right now are saying about all of these things, and I'd be looking for people who are champions for public kids, people who see that state level advocacy as an important part of local governance, and who are ready to go to bat for local kids and build those relationships with lawmakers to to try to influence them for the better.

[00:07:51] **Speaker 1** In the last budget, the most recent budget debate, part of the rhetoric that we heard from Robin Vos and other Republicans, I wrote the budget was. Kids are falling behind because of Covid, and they're blaming public schools for not doing a good enough job of catching kids up fast enough, saying you got all this federal dollars. How critical or how well, what what goes into an argument like that when they in the last you don't have to have two five year memory to go to the last budget. You said use those dollars for operational. And now they're saying you didn't use them. Correct. And the kids are behind.

[00:08:23] **Speaker 2** Yeah, there's a pretty grotesque irony there in kind of, you know, taking those resources away and then blaming public schools for not having had the resources to meet the needs of kids. It's again, it's hard. It's hard to watch that political rhetoric play out because it's impacting real kids in real time. Right? 16 years with without an inflationary increase. That's a whole generation of kids, pre-K through graduation who just never had enough. And when we think of all the ways that we want to improve our public education system, the, the, the things that we know work for kids, you know, investing in the community schools model, doing project based learning, expanding our access to, you know, well-rounded curricula and, and meeting the needs of English language learners, addressing the full needs of kids with disabilities, all of the things that we know work best for, thriving, joyful public schools environments, and then seeing the ways that the state has, like just intentionally disinvested from all of those things over time is is really challenging. But the good thing is, if we had leaders who are driven by by a can-do spirit of let's fix this, we could fix this, and it wouldn't even be that hard. There's there's a bipartisan plan on the table that's been getting dusty for the past seven years that came out of the Blue Ribbon Commission on school funding. And all of those ideas are still great. Right. It's really basic stuff, and none of it requires innovation or, anything really, other than a commitment to restoring our obligation to our kids.

[00:10:09] **Speaker 1** In the most recent budget, there ended up being a per pupil increase, and then Governor Evers used his line item veto power to make that indefinite pending any other court review. Is there a. Obviously it's good for schools to have an increase, but is there a danger that some voters may hear, oh, you just got more money in the last budget you don't need? Why do you need more operating funds?

[00:10:36] **Speaker 2** So first of all, let's talk about that increase. Public schools got $325 per student in new spending authority. That's how much more they can spend per kid in one year in order to keep pace with inflation. We would have needed a $3,380 per student increase. So what we got is roughly ten times less than what kids kids needed just to maintain the status quo. So let's not let's not do 2 to 2. Exciting! A victory dance on that. Yes. Any additional spending is is welcome by districts. They were grateful for this increase, especially having gotten none coming out of the pandemic. But it isn't exactly cause for celebration and it's like just shockingly, disgustingly, embarrassingly less than what kids actually need. The promise of being able to increase by that tiny amount for the next 400 years is also not really cause for joyful celebration in my book, because I would like to see those revenue limits undone entirely. It's an antiquated and unfair way of doing school finance, and rather than kind of cementing it into our permanent thinking about how we're going to fund our public schools, we should be talking about how to how to how to shake the whole system up and again align it to meeting the actual needs of our kids, not corresponding to somebody's fantasy of of how many dollars should be spent on public education.

[00:12:10] **Speaker 1** When you see the campaign efforts that districts are going through now, I mean, they're got glossy fliers. They're mailing out, they're doing promotional videos, they're doing meet the superintendent for coffee, they're doing come to the gym and tour. The school will show you the cracks in the foundation and the broken bathrooms. And should they have to go to those lengths, is that what's necessary now to convince voters that this is what they need?

[00:12:36] **Speaker 2** Well, unfortunately, that's become the new reality. Districts are wasting so much time on these sort of, you know, going out and, you know, selling the referenda question, making sure that their communities understand what's at stake, making sure that they have, you know, all of the resources and information folks need to be able to trust them on that. And, that that is, you know, just kind of an embarrassing, embarrassing necessity of the time. We would love to see the people that we are, you know, entrusting with our kids freed up to meet their actual needs to be focusing on teaching and instruction and in, you know, expanding the horizons of all of our kiddos and creating ways for them to, you know, have have a wonderful experience in our school buildings and said they're worried about keeping the lights on and folks aren't okay for that. But at Wisconsin Public Education Network, we kind of see the other side of it, right? The district is out there doing their thing. They they're presenting their, you know, fact based resources to the people we work with, the referenda teams, the people who are like, I will now give up every Saturday for the next eight weeks to, like, make sure this thing gets passed. And and those are the people who I think are often doing the lion's share of the work, and just getting out there and talking to folks at the grocery store or the football game or wherever that wherever they're meeting people. And, seeing people come together like that and think about, you know, what role do I play in standing up for local kids? What role do I play in making sure our kids have what they need to thrive? What role do I play in combating this disinformation and kind of helping folks get past the politics, which makes this all seem, you know, kind of, confusing, I think. I think that's where, that's where we're seeing the most movement in the, in the state. And, you know, there are just hundreds of these little referenda teams that have gotten together, you know, worked hard to get folks out to the ballot box and make an informed decision that then say, let's keep the gang together. I think I think they're going to need us for the budget fight. I think the district needs us to be a positive voice of sharing out the good things that are happening here and the things that we like about our, our school district. And again, that's, you know, kind of knew we didn't need that kind of thing ten, 20 years ago. But we're certainly a position now where it's it's becoming incumbent upon all of us to lift our collective voice, to make sure that our state leaders know that we're not going to sit by and just watch them undermine and underfund our public schools. We're here to stand up for them and fight for our kids.

[00:15:10] **Speaker 1** So give me a quick primer on on your on your group and what they do, because I'm sure a lot of the public may not be too familiar with who you are and how you interact.

[00:15:19] **Speaker 2** So Wisconsin Public Education Network is a loose coalition of people all over the state who are just worried about what's happening to our public schools, who see, you know, decades of cuts and of revenue limits and challenges facing facing kids, whether it's things like standardized testing and a teacher shortage to lack of funds at the state level to, you know, having the worst reimbursement rate in the nation for kids with special needs and who are saying, well, what can we do about it? Right? I might be an educator or a retired educator or a parent. I'm in a group. I'm hearing one thing, but how can we all come together and stand up for more? And our network provides tools, resources, trainings, even some mini grants for teams like these. These folks who are doing right. For to work to, to, get access to expert vetted information they can trust to kind of get past the politics and the, confusing, you know, school finance language that can sometimes make you scratch your head and just say, this is what this means to kids. And we try to amplify the stories that are happening at the local level by connecting with all of these groups and individuals around the state, so that we can of call on our lawmakers to do better and just be a bigger, better, collective voice for meeting the needs of Wisconsin kids. And we invite anyone who shares these concerns or who, you know, might have been thinking, you know, I know there's something wrong, but I don't know what I can do to come join us. Right? Come to our free events, follow us on on social media. Sign up for our our email newsletter. We try to keep people informed so that you know what bills are coming up at the Capitol. You know what's at stake in budget fights. You know what's on your ballot in the spring and then give you tools and resources to do something about it.

[00:17:09] **Speaker 1** How long has the group been around?

[00:17:11] **Speaker 2** Well, in various forms, it's been around since those revenue limits were put into place in the 1990s. People have have been very actively speaking up and getting organized about that. But, for the past ten years, we've been coordinating at the grassroots level as Wisconsin public. As for the past ten years, we've been coordinating at the grassroots level as Wisconsin Public Education Network.

[00:17:36] **Speaker 1** Okay. And is that as the focus strictly been on referenda type things and budgetary issues surrounding school funding, or are there other kind of branches?

[00:17:45] **Speaker 2** Well, there are lots of branches. I mean, our our goal is we want to see a Wisconsin where every single kid in every single public school has equal opportunity to thrive, equal access to all of the amazing things that we know. Kids need to have a great education. There is absolutely no reason why a state with as many resources as Wisconsin can't provide that to every kid, and we know we don't have that right now. We have huge racial disparities in this state, the worst in the nation. We have huge funding gaps in this state. We have huge opportunity gaps for kids across and between communities. And none of that is okay. We want to close all of those gaps, and our ultimate goal is to close that gap so that every little kid and every teacher who walks through our doors, every family who comes through the door of a school feels like they belong, feel like they are welcome, feels like this is where this is, where I find my place in my community. And I can connect with people so that we can live the lives we know all of our kids deserve and that we deserve as community members. That's the beauty of public schools in general, and that's what coming together can do.

[00:18:54] **Speaker 1** Anything else along these lines you want to add to the book real quick?

[00:19:05] **Speaker 2** No, I think I hit. I think I hit all of them. All of my.

[00:19:08] **Speaker 1** Can I get you to say in spell your name and give your title just so I have a Kryptonite.

[00:19:12] **Speaker 2** My name is Heather Du Bois Brennan, and I am executive director of Wisconsin Public Education Network.

[00:19:17] **Speaker 1** And what is the worst butchering of your name you've heard?

[00:19:21] **Speaker 2** I don't know, that's a good. That's a good one. My my personal favorite is when they keep the S and Du Bois silent. But but put an accent on the E at the end of Bourne on. So it would be, du du Bois Vernon. That's that's probably my favorite mispronunciation.

[00:19:40] **Speaker 1** Is it? Did you find it's worse from people who think they know a little French? They took French sophomore year of high school.

[00:19:45] **Speaker 2** Oh, no, those are the best. I just they say it as French as you can, and you'll be. You'll be pretty close to Bob or not.

[00:19:51] **Speaker 1** All right.

[00:19:52] **Speaker 2** Oh, and it's dub. Oh, I s b o u r e n a and e.

[00:19:57] **Speaker 1** Thank you very much. I know I was saying the.