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Poll shows misperceptions about state budget

Residents support school aid, but don't know it's highest cost

By [Karen Herzog](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Four out of 10 Wisconsin residents want state aid to elementary and secondary schools to be protected from spending cuts, but most don't realize school aid is the biggest expense in the state budget, according to a new poll.

The [Wisconsin Policy Research Institute](#) telephone survey of 615 randomly selected Wisconsin adults last Monday through Wednesday revealed misperceptions about the state budget, which officials may need to correct as they grapple with the upcoming two-year budget, said George Lightbourn, president of the conservative think tank.

Thirty percent of those polled said they thought Medicaid insurance for lower income households was the top expense in the state budget; it actually ranks second by a large margin. Twenty-one percent picked the correct answer: aid for elementary and secondary schools.

Others who guessed the top expense incorrectly included 13% who picked transportation, 12% who picked aid to local government (shared revenue), and 10% who guessed higher education, all of which are considerably less expensive than aid to elementary and secondary schools.

The state faces a projected deficit of at least \$2.2 billion in its upcoming two-year budget, assuming Governor-elect Scott Walker and lawmakers make spending cuts that have yet to happen - two more years of state employee furloughs, no pay raises, a virtual hiring freeze and belt tightening in state health programs, the Journal Sentinel reported Saturday.

Without that \$1.1 billion in savings, the shortfall is projected at \$3.3 billion.

The shortfall and efforts to close it could affect everything from schools and health care to local governments and taxpayers.

Walker has said he would never raise state taxes. So he will have to find efficiencies and make spending cuts to eliminate the deficit.

Fifty-six percent of those polled agreed with Walker's stand that they'd rather pay lower taxes and have a state government that provides fewer services.

Forty percent said they would oppose increasing the state sales tax to alleviate the budget deficit, while 39% said they would "completely favor" a proposal to increase taxes on higher income Wisconsin residents.

Asked which area of state spending they would most want to protect from cuts, 40% of poll respondents said aid to elementary and secondary schools.

Twenty-eight percent said it was most important to protect Medicaid insurance; 10% picked higher education. Aid to local government and transportation had the least support for protection from cuts.

Aid to local school districts is determined largely by factors beyond the control of local school districts.

Asked whether they would favor or oppose using some of this state aid to reward schools that do the best job of improving student performance, 38% of those surveyed said they would completely favor rewarding schools for performance improvement, and 32% said they would somewhat favor the reward.

Eleven percent said they would somewhat oppose the idea, and eight percent said they completely opposed it, while eight percent neither favored nor opposed it, and three percent didn't know or refused to answer the question.

Ken Goldstein, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, conducted the poll on behalf of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

Of the 615 surveyed, 457 were reached by landline and 158 were reached by cell phones. Forty-six percent reported their highest level of education was high school; another 21% had some college, but didn't finish. Thirty-three percent had at least a two-year college degree.

Results have a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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