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# JON PLUMER

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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 42<sup>nd</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony – Assembly Bill 564

## Assembly Committee on Mental Health September 21, 2021

Thank you Chair Tittl and members of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health for hearing Assembly Bill 564 today.

I'm sure it comes as no surprise to any of you that our children's mental health has been severely damaged as a result of the pandemic and actions taken in response to it. Children's emergency department visits have risen due to mental health. Suicides and drug overdose deaths have risen. Recently we learned that 60% of child suicides in Milwaukee County were tied to virtual learning. Getting our children back in school in person will help, but damage has already been done. We need to do what we can to address their mental health needs and this bill will help with that.

The American Rescue Plan Act or ARPA included \$219.8 billion in state fiscal recovery funds. Wisconsin is estimated to receive \$2.5 billion. Half has been received and the other half is expected in 2022. The Governor has allocated some of this, but much remains reserved in general categories with no real specifics of how the funds will be spent.

This bill would set aside a minimum of \$100 million for school mental health services. We know there is a need here and we also know that the mental health needs will be ongoing for years to come. ARPA funded costs can be incurred through 2024.

Allowable uses of these funds include *behavior health needs exacerbated by the pandemic* which includes mental health services. Mental health needs of students is an allowable use of these ARPA funds per the federal government's rules.

We also know that our school districts are sharing in over \$2.5 billion in coronavirus related federal funds. To provide transparency in how those funds are being spent and how the funds allocated in this bill will supplement them, this bill would require the Department of Public Instruction to provide a status report of how all federal coronavirus relief funds have been spent and how much remain prior to expending or obligating any of the mental health or school safety funds. This information would also be required to be posted online readily accessible to the public.

This bill would also require state agencies to provide all federal coronavirus relief fund reports to the Joint Committee on Finance concurrently when they are submitted to the federal government. This would provide transparency and oversight for the public and create no new burden because the reports are already required. Also, going forward this bill would require all state agencies to post these reports on their websites, readily accessible to the public. The public should know how billions in their dollars are being spent.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak in support of Assembly Bill 564 today and I look forward to working with you to get this bill passed and signed into law.



# INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

## MEMO

**TO:** Assembly Committee on Mental Health

**FROM:** Chris Reader, Executive Vice President of The Institute for Reforming Government

**DATE:** September 21, 2021

**RE:** Support for AB 564, COVID Relief Funds Reporting, School Mental Health Grants

Chairman Tittl and members of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health,

Thank you for holding a hearing today on Assembly Bill 564, important legislation that accomplishes two important goals. First, it appropriates \$100,000,000 of federal COVID relief funds for mental health grants to schools. Second, it shines a light on COVID relief funds spending in the state to help lawmakers, taxpayers, watchdog groups, and members of the media better see and understand where the billions of federal COVID dollars that have been received by Wisconsin state agencies and schools have been spent. I also want to thank Representative Plumer, who is my hometown representative, for authoring this important legislation.

My name is Chris Reader. I am the Executive Vice President of the Institute for Reforming Government, a Wisconsin-based non-profit think tank. Our mission is to encourage, educate, and inform people about all levels of government- and our focus is to help remove the onerous barriers and red tape separating individuals from an efficient and functioning government.

One way to ensure an efficient and functioning government is to empower citizens through government spending transparency. Assembly Bill 564 continues Wisconsin's proud tradition of open and transparent government. 25 million state expenditures dating back to 2008 from all state agencies are available online at [OpenBook.wi.gov](http://OpenBook.wi.gov) for anyone to search, review, scrutinize, and praise. The Governor notes on the OpenBook homepage that "Government works best when our work is transparent and citizens can easily hold elected officials accountable."

But, throughout the pandemic, as record levels of federal funding have poured into the state, there has been little to no attempt by the federal government or the executive branch in Wisconsin to ensure transparency. With over \$5 billion of federal COVID funds directed to state government according to Wisconsin Policy Forum's April 2021 report *Unprecedented Aid*, watchdog groups, taxpayers, members of the media, and even lawmakers have been left largely in the dark when it comes to knowing how, where, and even if those funds are being spent by the executive branch.

AB 564 shines a light on how the executive branch is spending federal COVID relief funds with common sense reporting requirements. It requires any state agency that is already required to

submit a status update or compliance report to the federal government on how it is spending COVID relief funds to also submit that same report to the Joint Committee on Finance along with posting the report online where it is readily accessible.

AB 564 also shines a needed light on all federal COVID funding that has been directed to schools in Wisconsin. Over \$2 billion from the federal government has been directed to schools in Wisconsin, but like the state, there is little transparency on how the money is being used. AB 564 requires a public accounting of all federal COVID funds that have been received by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), school districts, independent charter schools, and private schools, a breakdown of how the moneys have been spent, and reporting how much of the money remains unspent.

Beyond the transparency measures in the bill, and arguably more important, AB 564 requires DPI to spend a portion of the federal COVID funds it has received on mental health grants to schools. The state budget that lawmakers crafted earlier this year increased mental health categorical aid funding by \$12 million, and mental health service grants by \$7 million. DPI recently announced mental health grants totaling \$10 million to 153 applicant school districts. Lawmakers in previous sessions approved many measures to address mental health concerns, including tackling the related substance abuse issues that inevitably follow. AB 564 builds upon these bipartisan efforts and investments by requiring DPI to allocate at least \$100 million of the COVID relief funds the agency received in the form of grants to public, charter, and private schools.

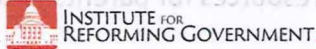
Prior to the pandemic, the mental health of children was an area of growing concern for parents, school officials, and policymakers. Layer on top of those preexisting concerns the unknown mental health impacts of the pandemic and the increase in anxiety and depression among youth, and it is clear that using federal COVID funds for these grants is a necessary and worthwhile goal.

What is the long-term mental health impact of virtual learning for so many students last year, being away from the structure of school and separated from friends and school support staff? What is the mental health impact for the tens of thousands of students that school districts lost track of during virtual learning last year? What is the ongoing mental health impact of seeing parents and family members struggle with anxiety and depression brought on by the pandemic, or seeing a parent lose a job or have reduced hours at work because of the pandemic and subsequent government orders? With an extended gap from in person instruction, many school districts around the state have not been in a position to identify students with recent mental health setbacks. Combined with the universe of children pre-pandemic who had issues, now is the time to both provide services and new mental health screenings.

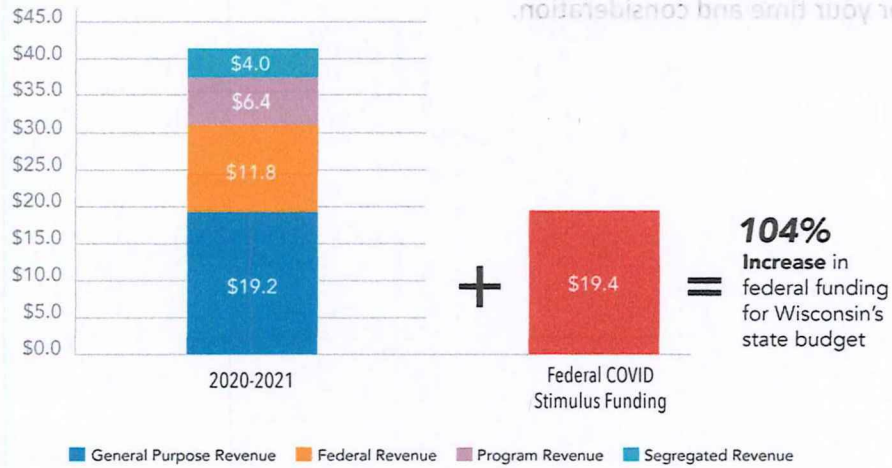
Wisconsin Public Radio reported back in February on data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that at that time already showed children's mental health emergencies had increased substantially since the start of the pandemic. Emergency room visits had risen from April to October last year by over 24 percent for children ages 5 to 11, and 31 percent for ages 12 to 17. This isn't a crisis in the making – it's already here and must be addressed head on.

Policymakers should also consider what resources parents need to be able to help their children with the many mental health ailments brought on or heightened by the pandemic. For many parents, these are problems they never dealt with personally – and they may need help

CHARTS TO KNOW:



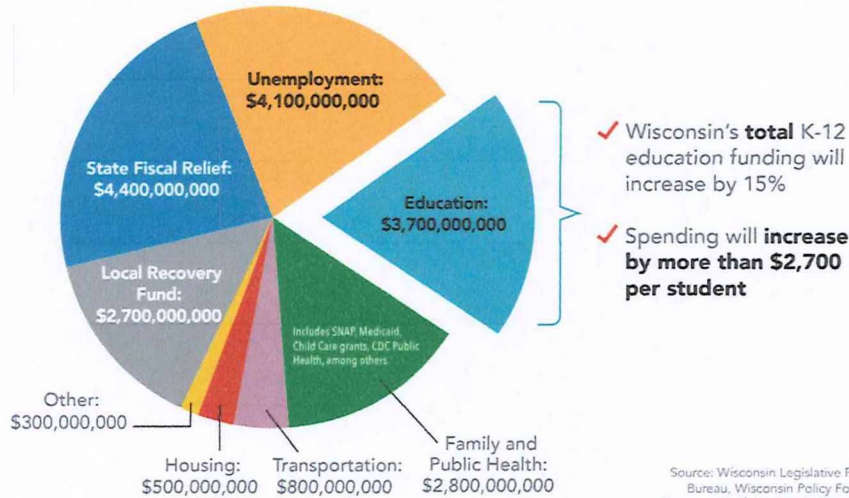
Wisconsin Biennial Budget 2020 – 2021  
Compared to Wisconsin Federal Covid Funding (Billions of Dollars)



Source: USASpending.gov, Peter G. Peterson Coronavirus tracker, Wisconsin Policy Forum, Department of Treasury, Education, OMB, CBO, Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau.



Wisconsin's COVID Federal Stimulus Funding  
(American Rescue Plan, Consolidated Appropriations, CAREs Act)  
(In total, \$19.4 billion dollars)

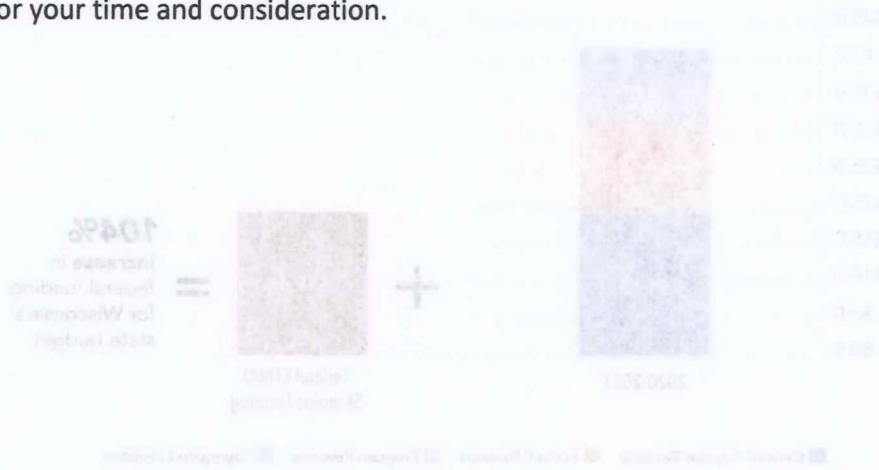


Source: Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Wisconsin Policy Forum, Department of Treasury & Education, Peter G. Peterson Foundation

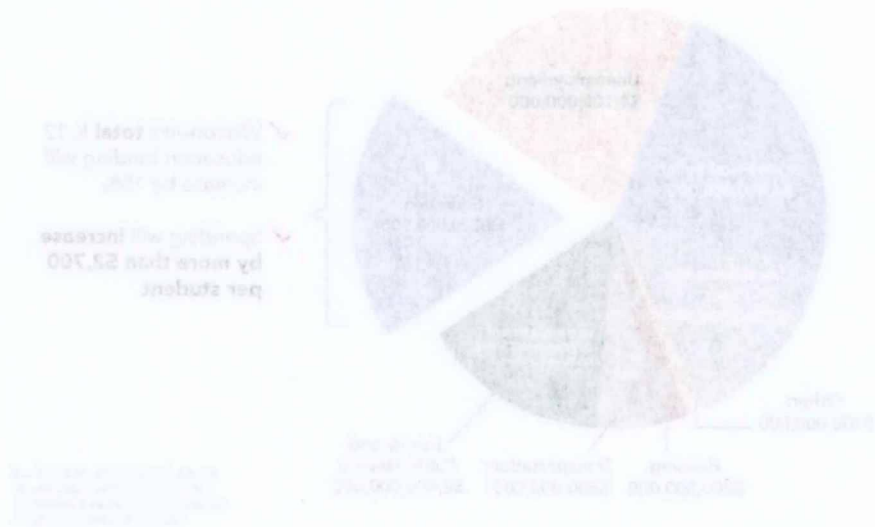
understanding the issues in order to help their children. Parents are the best advocates for their children, and the grants in AB 564 could bolster the available resources for parents to tap into.

AB 564 rightfully appropriates federal COVID funding for mental health grants to schools. The bill also shines a light on how the state and schools have spent COVID funding to date, allowing lawmakers, watchdog groups, citizens, and members of the media to better see and understand how the record influx of spending has been spent. We urge you to support AB 564.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Wisconsin's COVID Federal Stimulus Funding  
(American Rescue Plan, Consolidated Appropriations, CARES Act)  
(in total, \$19.4 billion dollars)





WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY, INC.

September 21, 2021

Dear Chairman Tittl and members of the Committee on Mental Health,

I submit testimony today in support of Assembly Bill 564, a transparency bill that will inform parents, school leaders and policymakers about how millions of federal pandemic relief funds were allocated for student mental health. This information is critical as Wisconsin continues to grapple with the impact of the pandemic and its detrimental impact on students. AB 564 also directs Governor Evers to use some of his billions of pandemic funding to provide schools with access to grants for mental health programs.

Without a doubt, **the pandemic resulted in tremendous hardship for our students and their families.** School closures, and shutdown of the economy created unprecedented stress for Badger families. After such events, mental health services for students are more important than ever. Schools should be encouraged to be innovative and provide mental health services to their communities in a variety of different ways.

In fact, there are many schools which have prioritized mental health services for their students prior to the pandemic. Several private schools across Milwaukee partnered with Christian Family Solutions, an organization dedicated to providing counseling services to students, adults and organizations, through individual counseling, day treatment and psychiatric care.<sup>1</sup> These services are provided at a variety of locations across Milwaukee, including several clinics located in private schools.<sup>2</sup> This allows the services to be incorporated into the students' daily schooling. This innovative partnership helps students access counseling services at a familiar and safe place while allowing the organization space near communities with high needs. With grants of funding to both public and private schools, AB 564 may help encourage more innovative partnerships and programs to serve students across the state.

The federal pandemic funds include a large pot of dollars dedicated to K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. Specifically, Governor Evers has over \$100 million to allocate just to schools. There is delayed reporting<sup>3</sup> on these federal dollars so it is unclear how much Governor Evers has allocated and how the administration decided to allocate any funds that have been disbursed. **AB 564 provides critical transparency efforts so it is easier for taxpayers to understand where these federal relief dollars are being allocated.**

Furthermore, within the large pot of funds dedicated to education, there are very few strings attached for public schools. Unfortunately, the same flexibility with these funds is not provided to private schools. **AB 564 will provide important access to funding for private schools across the state so they can access pandemic dollars in a similar manner as public schools.**

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Family Solutions, <https://christianfamilysolutions.org/christian-counseling-care-and-services/counseling-for-organizations/>

<sup>2</sup> Christian Family Solutions, Clinic locations, <https://christianfamilysolutions.org/locations/>

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Education, Education Stabilization Fund, Wisconsin, <https://covid-relief-data.ed.gov/profile/state/WI>. *According to the US Department of Education, as of July 31, 2021, zero dollars awarded from the Governors Emergency Education Fund (GEER) have been spent.*

The reporting requirements of grants created by AB 564 are a significant and necessary part of the bill's impact. **Without a doubt, the additional pandemic funds will create a funding cliff for school programs and staff.** The legislature will need to have access to as much information as possible to understand the effectiveness of the federal funds, the impact of the programs and how the state will approach K-12 funding in 2023.

I believe that Assembly Bill 564 is a critical step in the right direction by providing much needed transparency about the federal pandemic relief funds. This bill will also help provide examples of mental programs by schools that

Thank you so much for the time. Do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Libby Sobic  
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Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty  
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*Every student and adult will feel safe and supported in order to cultivate their unique gifts and have the opportunity and encouragement to further their best selves.*



**Our Mission:** Through coaching partnerships the Wisconsin Center for Resilient Schools collaborates to strengthen student and adult resilience through equitable, comprehensive school-based mental health and trauma sensitive social emotional learning in order to promote academic success for every student.

**Focus Areas:**

The Wisconsin Center for Resilient Schools (WCRS) is a resource-rich hub for school teams and leaders seeking to initiate or sustain meaningful change efforts toward comprehensive school-based mental health and trauma sensitive social and emotional learning. Our team of experienced and energetic coaches will partner with your schools and districts to provide coaching strategies to facilitate your goals for transformational change.

Our coaching services are augmented by a direct partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Wisconsin Safe and Healthy Schools Center. These partnerships provide opportunities for consultation, access to research-based resources and tools, and connections to technical assistance for your leadership and improvement teams. We stand ready to support your team and your mission, through coaching that centers equity for all students, as you engage your school community in small or large scale change.



**Research** gathered from the Wisconsin RTI Center, the Wisconsin PBIS Network, and the Wisconsin Department of Public instruction has established the importance of coaching and feedback in the successful implementation of new practices with sustainability. Currently, alongside the training, guidance, and robust resources from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, school and district teams across the state have very few options to receive coaching in systemic implementation in the areas of trauma sensitive SEL and school based mental health. The focus of the WCRS is coaching teams that have engaged in training and would like to effectively utilize these resources to implement change.

***Every student and adult will feel safe and supported in order to cultivate their unique gifts and have the opportunity and encouragement to further their best selves.***

### **What is Coaching?**

Coaching is a partnership. Coaching provides a relationship structure through which we can reflect, grow, and refine structures and practices and shape beliefs and culture toward the vision in your school or district for optimal student outcomes. It may take place during any stage of the implementation of new skills, strategies, processes, and structures. *Coaching builds on the strengths inherent in your system to take it from good to great!*

### **WCRS coaching can help your district or school teams to:**

- Strengthen and align systems that support comprehensive school-based mental health and trauma sensitive social emotional learning in order to promote academic success for each student
- Engage with data, resources, and tools to create a sustainable plan to reach your desired outcomes
- Develop strategies for stakeholder engagement
- Explicitly position and communicate about trauma sensitive SEL as a lever for equity

### **How do schools and districts engage with WCRS?**

- Coaching through the WCRS is free and available to public, private, and non-public charter schools and districts throughout the state of Wisconsin
- Complete our interest inquiry form [here](#) and we will contact you
- The WCRS will work with teams conveniently through virtual platforms



[Website](#)

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**Wisconsin Center for Resilient Schools**

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*Lisa Stein*

*"Every student and adult will feel safe and supported in order to cultivate their unique gifts and have the opportunity and encouragement to further their best selves"*