



Berlin Journal Article
Point of Focus
Berlin Area School District

September 16, 2024

Author: Dr. Emmett Durtschi

Topic: Referendum - Pass/Fail

Title: Referendum Pass/Fail Implications

Last week in this column I wrote about the decision the Berlin Area School District's Board of Education made to place an operational funding referendum question on the November 5th general election ballot. In last week's column I shared a brief overview of the April 2023 operational referendum, the thinking behind the upcoming November referendum, and the referendum question language that will appear on each ballot.

In the coming weeks I will focus my articles on diving deeper into various topics related to the school referendum including understanding school finance, specifics about the tax impact for our tax payers, and the reasoning behind the referendum. This week I will focus on the implications if the referendum were to pass or fail.

On the district's website under *Referendum 2024*, there are various resources available to better understand the referendum. I encourage all individuals who are interested in learning more about the referendum to check out the resources contained on the district website. One chart that is of particular interest and importance lays out some of the benefits of a passing referendum as well as the implications of a failed referendum. The remainder of this article will focus on the five key areas contained in the chart.

Teachers and Support Staff

The largest and most important portion of a school district's budget goes towards compensating our teachers and support staff. Over 70% of a typical district's budget is spent on recruiting, hiring, and retaining highly qualified teachers and support staff. This cost includes salaries as well as benefits. The single most important variable that positively impacts student achievement and school success is a qualified teacher in each classroom. Due to state imposed budget restrictions as well as declining enrollment, we have had to reduce staffing levels. This year alone we have cut over \$1,000,000 in staffing expenses. If the referendum passes in November,

we will have to continue to gradually reduce staff positions. But, if the referendum fails to pass we will need to cut up to 10% of our teaching and support staff positions for the 2025-26 school year. This will increase class sizes and negatively impact student achievement.

Class Sizes

The Berlin Area School District has a long history of reasonable class sizes, typically between as low as 15-20 students in the early elementary grades to 20-28 in the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. These smaller class sizes help support student learning and fosters a positive experience for students and teachers. Smaller class sizes encourage stronger teacher/student relationships and provide more opportunities for small group and individualized instruction. If the referendum fails, class sizes will increase, which will negatively impact student learning and will necessitate the elimination of some courses and programs.

Student Achievement

There is ample evidence that under-funding schools reduces student achievement over time, not just here in Berlin, but across the state and country. Although there are examples of over and under performing schools and districts that do not appear to correlate with funding, if you look at school systems as a whole, funding impacts learning. Over a decade ago the Wisconsin legislature decoupled state funding from inflation, which has led to most districts receiving significantly less funding and has resulted in over 85% of school districts needing to go to the public to pass an operational referendum. During this same time period, Wisconsin has slipped in student achievement and other indicators compared with other states across the country. If the referendum fails in November, there will be a negative impact on student achievement for our students in the Berlin Area School District.

Educational Programs and Budgets

The ability for a school district to offer a wide range of educational programs for students depends upon staffing levels and funding. Reduced funding that outpaces enrollment declines will require the reduction and possible elimination of some educational programs, course offerings, and extracurricular opportunities. This reduction in programming is already happening as a result of the public voting down the last operational referendum in April 2023. If the referendum in November fails, programs will shrink, others will be eliminated, and budgets, including athletic budgets will be reduced by up to 20%. This will negatively impact student engagement and achievement.

Building Maintenance and Improvements

Second only to hiring, retaining, and supporting highly qualified teachers and support staff, the school buildings and facilities play a critical role in a student's educational experience. In April 2023 there were two referendum questions on the ballot, which both failed to pass. One was an operational referendum and the other was a capital referendum question to pay for facility improvements. Due to both referendum questions failing, larger improvements had to be postponed. The referendum in November does not include the second question posed to the public last time. If the operational referendum fails for a second time in November, capital projects will need to be further delayed and maintenance budgets will need to be reduced.

I encourage everyone to learn more about our schools, inform yourselves regarding the referendum question, and then get out to vote on November 5th. In the coming weeks there will be mailers, social media posts, webpages, articles in the Berlin Journal, and community meetings. Since all taxpayers in the district boundaries support our schools through property taxes, it is important to learn more about our schools and the value they bring to the community.

Thank you for your continued support of our children and community.