**Fiscal Facts: Voters approve more money for schools amid COVID-19 pandemic**

In the April election, Wisconsin voters again approved the vast majority of school district referenda to increase local property taxes, despite the economic uncertainty linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2016, nearly two-thirds of all school districts across the state have passed referenda to exceed state-imposed caps on revenue, with high rates of approval extending across urban, suburban, and rural districts.

Last month, voters approved school spending increases of more than $1.7 billion. That total includes a billion-dollar referendum in the Racine Unified School District (RUSD), which passed by four votes and is currently being challenged in court. Statewide, the approval rate was 87% in the April election — 52 of the 60 referenda — following a largely consistent trend of voters endorsing more spending for their local schools.

Approval of these referenda give districts authority to exceed state caps on the revenue they may collect through their combined local property taxes and general state aid. Districts may seek to exceed these caps to issue and make payments on debt for capital building projects or to fund operations. Operating referenda may be non-recurring, meaning they expire at some point, or recurring, which do not.

In the April elections, occurring amid unprecedented circumstances created by the COVID-19 crisis, voters accepted 25 referenda for issuing debt totaling $485 million. Twenty-seven were for operations, of which 21 were non-recurring referenda totaling $1.16 billion, and six were recurring, totaling $97 million.

Whatever the future holds, recent trends on school referenda and what they convey about voter attitudes are one factor for policymakers to consider as they wrestle with huge budgetary challenges in the months ahead. They suggest many Wisconsin voters want to ensure their local schools have adequate financial resources, even if it means dipping into their own pockets to do so at a time of crisis.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at*[*wispolicyforum.org*](http://wispolicyforum.org/)*.*