

The number of Wisconsin school referendums this year is up – way up. Here’s why.



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While the presidential election season is gearing up, voters in more than 100 school districts statewide will have other issues to weigh in on when they go to the polls in November: school referendums.

A lot of school referendums.

Together with referendums that were held earlier this year, the number of school referendums in 2024 will be almost three times the number held in 2023.

Under state law, school districts had until late August to decide to put referendums on the November ballot. This year, 120 districts chose to do so, with 136 total referendums, [according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#). Some districts have more than one referendum on the ballot this year.

Why so many school referendums this year?

State funding has remained relatively stable over the last few years. In the face of rising inflation, school districts have needed to raise more through taxes, but because of state-imposed revenue limits, districts are unable to levy enough taxes to cover their rising costs. Revenue limits have not kept up with the rate of inflation since 2009.

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The revenue limits, combined with declining enrollment and older facilities, often mean districts face difficult financial decisions. The result is that schools turn to voters through referendums to raise the additional funds they need.



Contributing to the problem this year: Pandemic relief funding that school districts have received since 2020 is expiring at the end of September.

“It is our responsibility as a state to ensure our public schools have the resources needed to meet the needs of all students,” said state Superintendent Jill Underly of the DPI. “After years of being underfunded by the legislature, more and more school districts are forced to go to referendum and ask their community to raise their own taxes just so their schools can continue to operate. It is time for the legislature to live up to its responsibility and provide adequate funding to our public schools, so all our kids continue getting a great education.”

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How many referendums went to voters already this year, and how many were approved?

In February and April, there were 103 school referendums on the February and April ballots statewide. Voters approved 62, or 60.2%, of them, [according to an April report by the Wisconsin Policy Forum](#).

"Voters in 56 districts approved one or more referenda, 21 of which will allow districts to borrow for capital projects and raise property taxes to pay off the debt. The remaining 41 will allow districts to raise levies to boost their operations," the report said.

On Aug. 13, a proposed \$5.155 million operational referendum in the Riverdale School District in western Wisconsin failed.

How many referendums were there in 2023?

In 2023, [there were 83 referendums, with 46 of them passing](#). Out of the referendums that passed, 28 were operational referendums, and 18 were capital referendums, [according to the Wisconsin Department of Instruction's referendum history database](#).

Here's what else you need to know about school referendums:

There are two kinds of referendums: operational and capital

School districts can pursue two kinds of referendums: operational and capital.

Operational referendums help school districts fund day-to-day operations such as salaries and benefits. They can be "recurring," meaning the funding runs indefinitely, or "non-recurring," meaning that the funding runs for a limited number of years. Districts do not typically take out loans for these type of referendums, but instead raise that money by increasing the tax levy.



Capital referendums allow school districts to borrow money to pay for construction/renovation projects or facility maintenance they can't afford to do through their normal operating budgets. Districts often take out loans for these referendums and spread out repayment over many years.

Here's a look at what school districts are planning referendums in the Appleton area, Green Bay area and Milwaukee area.

What Appleton area school districts have referendums on this November's ballot?

The Appleton area school districts with referendums in November are:

- **Kaukauna Area School District:** a \$198 million facilities referendum

What Green Bay area school districts have referendums on this November's ballot?

The Green Bay area school districts with referendums in November are:

- [Ashwaubenon School District](#): a \$2.85 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [De Pere School District](#): a \$22 million facilities referendum
- [Green Bay Area Public School District](#): a \$183 million facilities referendum

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What Milwaukee area school districts have referendums on this November's ballot?

The Milwaukee area school districts with referendums in November are:

- [Arrowhead Union High School District](#): a \$261.2 million facilities referendum and a \$7.6 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [Cudahy School District](#): a \$12 million facilities referendum and a \$10.4 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [Franklin Public Schools](#): a \$145 million facilities referendum
- [Glendale-River Hills School District](#): a \$9 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [Maple Dale-Indian Hill School District](#): a \$1.75 million recurring operational referendum
- [Mequon-Thiensville School District](#): a \$26.4 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [Mukwonago Area School District](#): an \$89.1 million facilities referendum
- [Oak Creek-Franklin School District](#): a \$34.3 million facilities referendum
- [St. Francis School District](#): a \$10.2 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [Wauwatosa School District](#): a \$60 million facilities referendum and a \$64.4 million non-recurring operational referendum
- [West Allis-West Milwaukee School District](#): A \$70 million facilities referendum and a \$5.8 million recurring operational referendum
- [West Bend School District](#): \$106.25 million facilities referendum

- [Whitnall School District](#): \$79.1 million facilities referendum

Where is the largest referendum question on the ballot this November?

The district with the largest referendum on the November ballot is the [Madison Metropolitan School District](#). It has a \$507 million facilities referendum question, along with a \$100 million operational referendum question, on the November ballot.

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