



# Helping schools help disabled students

My 'Better Bottom Line' gives schools \$1,000 per student, if they're successfully employed or in job training one year after graduation

by Wisconsin Assembly Assistant Majority Leader Rob Brooks (Rep.Rob.Brooks@legis.wisconsin.gov)

A few months into my inaugural term, I had the opportunity to meet with two high school students, Autumn and Nathan, and their transitional teacher, Josiah. Our conversation centered on their employment experience as students with disabilities. Both Autumn and Nathan had such fervor and enthusiasm for work and were appreciative of the teacher who had made their employment possible.

I have always considered our youth to be Wisconsin's greatest resource, and this meeting especially confirmed my belief. Autumn and Nathan made me hopeful about our state's future and sparked an idea on how to ensure that theirs, and other students', remained bright.

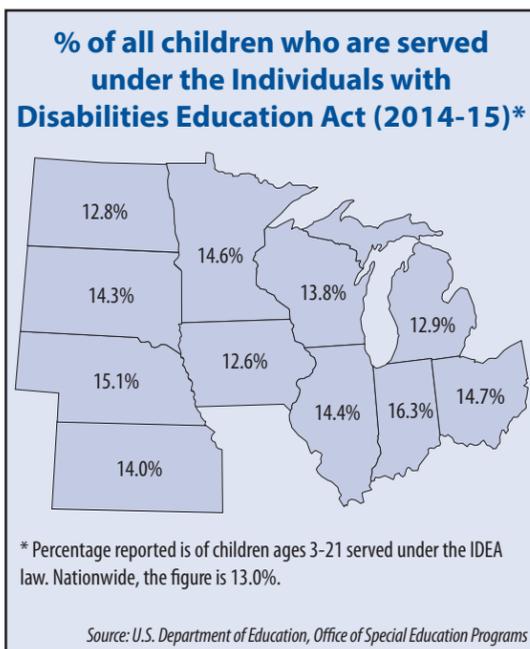
That was the reason behind a budget motion that I authored last session (2015-16): My "Better Bottom Line Initiative" seeks to improve employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities, allowing them to contribute to our economy.

The proposal offered a \$1,000-per-pupil incentive payment to school districts that can show that they are preparing their students with disabilities for the workforce or post-secondary education or training courses.

Schools are required to report their outcomes for students for one year after graduation to receive payment. Students must be working or enrolled in a training program or college to qualify for the program.

In turn, schools can use this incentive payment to improve their transition programs with activities such as purchasing a van for transporting students to jobs, adding more teachers or paraprofessionals to support job development, offering more resources for college preparation and Advanced Placement courses, creating ACT study sessions for students with disabilities, and learning how to use data to further develop quality special-education programs.

This pay-for-performance fund does not serve solely as an incentive to school districts that assist students with disabilities in achieving their educational and employment goals. Rather, it helps cover what can be extraordinary startup costs of securing a youth's first work experience: transportation to the job, time for a transition teacher to meet with local businesses, or a job coach to help train workers.



The performance payment amount was decided upon after receiving input from constituents and stakeholders, who understand these essential costs and the need for reimbursement.

All districts across the state are eligible to obtain funds, if they meet the requirements.

I understand that we have a long way to go in Wisconsin — for some groups of students with disabilities, more than one-third report never participating in any further education, training or employment one year out of school. The Better Bottom Line Initiative moves opportunities for students with disabilities in a positive direction.

## Big boost for incentive in new budget

Most Wisconsin school districts do not have the targeted transition programs necessary to connect students with local businesses, and teachers receive little training on how to partner with the private sector to drive workforce needs. Data show that youths with disabilities who leave school unprepared for adult life often spend a lifetime in poverty and become reliant upon public benefits.

Research has shown that when students with disabilities have one paid position before graduation, their chance of obtaining long-standing employment as adults doubles. Two paid job experiences increase their likelihood of employment fivefold.

This initiative gained significant support from school districts, educators and students, statewide, but my proposal received just \$100,000 in the 2015-17 biennial budget. School districts that were successful in meeting the goals of the initiative received only \$75 per pupil instead of the originally proposed and announced incentive payment of \$1,000 per student.

While I was grateful that the Better Bottom Line Initiative was included in the 2015-17 budget, I knew that I would continue fighting for a higher funding level. I needed to find a way to turn the goal of a \$1,000-per-pupil incentive payment into a reality.

My constituents sent me back to Madison for a second term, and that meant I could work toward additional funding for the Better Bottom Line Initiative.

When the 2017-19 budget season approached, I worked diligently with disability advocates, school districts, local businesses, and workforce development groups to formulate a plan to obtain more funding for this pay-for-performance program.

I submitted a budget motion and letter to the governor emphasizing the need for increased funding.

Our persistence and hard work paid off, and Wisconsin's current state budget included \$7.6 million to help school districts to connect disabled students with jobs. I was most grateful that my proposal is now funded adequately.

Improving Wisconsin's economy and addressing our workforce needs continues to be one of my top priorities.

My proposal helps students with disabilities continue to be strong players in the workforce and will provide school districts with the tools they need to help their students flourish.

My role in ensuring the success of our students has been one of the most rewarding experiences during my time as a legislator. I look forward to exploring additional ways to achieve these goals in future legislative sessions.

Rep. Rob Brooks has been a member of the Wisconsin Assembly since 2014. He was chosen as assistant majority leader in 2017.

## Submissions welcome

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