



# Jon Erpenbach

WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR · DISTRICT 27

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 2/21/2020

CONTACT: Senator Erpenbach  
(608) 266-6670

## Republicans chose to Increase Penalties Instead of Educational Opportunities

By: Senator Jon Erpenbach

West Point - Wisconsin's criminal justice system has some of the worst racial disparities in the country. Years of Republican budget cuts and prisons exceeding capacity have created more dangerous situations for correctional officers, inmates, and communities. Yet, Republicans are continuing to pass legislation to put more people in prisons without increased funding, and refusing to invest in programs that are proven to help reduce our children's chances of ending up in Wisconsin's prisons.

On March 30, 2018 Act 185 was passed. The bill stated that Wisconsin must close the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake School by July 1, 2021. As a reminder, after years of inaction by the Walker Administration, there was a bi-partisan effort to close these facilities following accusations of child abuse and neglect, inhumane uses of solitary confinement, and an unsafe work environment. The bill also required the Department of Corrections (DOC) to establish a new Type 1 juvenile correctional facility by the same deadline. In Governor Evers' budget proposal he allocated an additional and necessary \$90 million to new facilities, and Republicans zeroed that proposal out. Fast forward to Wednesday, February 12, the plan for a new Type 1 Correctional Facility came before JFC and Republicans once again rejected the proposal leaving the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake School open indefinitely-despite their own law requiring them to close.

The following week the Senate is in session on Wednesday, February 19, and on the calendar are bills aimed at increasing criminal penalties for children. For example, Senate Bill 769 would increase penalties for vehicle theft, reckless driving, and fleeing an officer by a felony classification and impose a 30-day mandatory minimum term of incarceration for vehicle theft, knowingly being a passenger in a stolen vehicle, or removing a part of a vehicle without consent of the owner. According to the City of Milwaukee, between 2017 and 2019, property crimes are down 30%, and this bill would result in more children in correctional facilities without evidence that the increased punishment would deter criminal activity.

Additionally, the Senate voted on Assembly Bill (AB) 805 and 806. AB 805 would require the DOC to recommend revoking a person's extended supervision, parole, or prohibition if they are charged with a crime while on extended supervision, parole, or probation. According to Kevin Carr, the DOC Secretary this bill would "eliminate the department's current framework of determining the best course of action when a person under supervision is charged with a crime." AB 806 expands the crimes for which a juvenile can be placed in the Serious Juvenile Offender Program (SJOP) or a correctional facility. Again Secretary Carr stated that the bill would "expand the number of incarcerated youth, at a time when the

legislature has yet to move forward....on the submitted plan for the construction of two Type 1 facilities.”

On February 13, 2020, State Representative Joe Sanfelippo (R-Berlin) made a claim in support of the Republican “tougher on crime” bills, which Politifact rated as “Pants on Fire.” The report states that his claim is “not only false, but ridiculous.” Republicans are attempting to push a narrative to make Wisconsinites believe that violent crime rates have increased almost everywhere in the state between 2008 and 2017, and as Politifact states, “almost every word of that is wrong.” Republicans are trying to solve a problem that does not exist by putting more people in our prisons.

Meanwhile, Republicans rejected Governor Evers’ proposal to restore cuts to education. Currently, Wisconsin state taxpayers spend more than \$33,000 per incarcerated person each year compared to \$7,000 per student in state aid. We are spending more per person on our prison system than on ensuring our children’s future, and unfortunately giving a child a criminal record now will have a domino effect on the rest of their lives. The Republicans opted for a pre-election tax cut over the Governor’s plan to cut property taxes by \$130 million, returning the state to 2/3 funding for schools, and leaving more money in the state’s rainy day fund to keep our budget balanced.

The funding in the education proposal would have made significant improvements in our schools’ ability to provide mental health care programs for our children. There is a growing need for mental health care in our schools which would be highly beneficial for our children, but Republicans chose to increase penalties instead of educational opportunities. Early intervention is proven to lead to better outcomes down the road.

Republicans are depriving our children of the opportunity of a quality education by rejecting the Governor’s plan to invest in classrooms, special education, mental health care, and rural schools. Unfortunately, Wisconsin will feel their decisions for a long time, as our students enter the prison system, workforce, and adulthood here in Wisconsin. Whether or not Republicans would like to admit it, our children are our future, and it is the state’s responsibility to pass smart policies that safely reduce the prison population and reinvest savings to reduce crime.

###