



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

March 4, 2022

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly every aspect of our lives over the past two years, the area in which we will feel the longest lasting impact is probably in the education of our children. For many kids it simply will be impossible to recover from the learning loss they experienced, particularly for those who were just learning to read. Test scores are already showing the detrimental effect.

School boards have struggled to find the balance between protecting public health and continuing to educate our children, knowing that they will face angry parents no matter what decisions they make on masks and in-person learning.

All of this – in addition to the social unrest that our nation is experiencing – has brought to the forefront the debate over parental involvement in education.

We must all recognize that parents are the most important teachers that a child will ever have. Every good teacher will admit that involved, supportive parents are vital to our children reaching their true potential. We also know that kids who do not have that support at home are at a severe disadvantage.

Because every person learns differently, I believe that, to the extent possible, we must allow parents to have a voice in determining what is best for their children.

I was on the Sturgeon Bay School Board for 14 years and I will always be an advocate for strong public schools. We are very fortunate that all of the school districts in our area provide high-quality education. My three children all attended public schools and they were well prepared for college when they graduated. That being said, I respect that some parents will determine that their children would do better in a private school or homeschool environment.

In Wisconsin, parents and students have many educational options. They may attend a public school in their own district or a public school in another district through open enrollment. They can also attend a religious or non-religious private school. If their family income is low to moderate, they can receive a voucher that will cover tuition through the statewide parental choice program. There are also charter schools available in many areas. Furthermore, parents may elect to homeschool their child.

Recently, the Assembly passed a bill that would remove all limits on the number of students who may receive private school vouchers, as well as income restrictions, under the statewide parental choice program. While I philosophically agree that children should have as many options as possible available to them, my position has always been that I would not support full expansion of the program until I



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

knew it would be funded in a manner that would not overly burden our taxpayers or take money away from our public schools.

Under the current school funding formula, this proposal would increase property taxes rather dramatically if it became law. We all know that Gov. Evers will not sign this bill, so most of my Republican colleagues supported it as a statement of principle. For me, I could not in good faith vote in favor of the bill without an accompanying funding formula change.

No matter which type of school parents elect, I believe that they have a right to know what is being taught to their children. As a parent, I never felt threatened if material was interpreted by a teacher in a way in which I disagreed. We can never completely control everything our children hear, but good parents have conversations with their kids so that they can think through all sides of an issue. Knowing what is being taught facilitates those discussions.

There will always be a small number of parents who inappropriately insert themselves into every aspect of what is going on in the classroom. We must not, however, allow those few outliers to prevent parents and teachers from forming the natural, respectful partnerships that maximize learning.

We can all see the disruptions and negative impacts caused by the pandemic. It will undoubtedly color our views on the workplace and the role of government for years to come. It is my hope that it also awakens parents to the reality that education is a team effort and that they have a crucial role to play.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Kitchens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "K".

Rep. Joel Kitchens
1st Assembly District