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Appointed superintendent will improve public school system

MADISON, Wis. – Since I began circulating a resolution asking voters to decide whether the superintendent of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction should be changed to an appointed position, I've heard numerous allegations that are way off base.

Chief among them is the claim that my proposal is nothing more than a Republican power grab. However, to accept that as truth, you'd have to ignore history.

Maybe I have more faith in the Democratic Party than their own members, but I think it's ridiculous to believe a Democrat will never again hold the office of governor. In fact, over the last 50-plus years, five of the 10 governors have been Democrats.

This resolution will provide for a fair and balanced approach because both Republicans and Democrats will have the opportunity to select the superintendent. Besides, it really shouldn't matter which party makes the appointment. All that matters is we pick the best possible candidate and see steady improvement in our public school system.

What I am proposing is not out of the ordinary, either. Wisconsin is one of only 12 states in the nation that still elects its state superintendent of public schools rather than appoint that position. Of those states, almost half are ranked in the top 10 worst state school systems in the country.

That begs the question: If electing a state superintendent is meant to produce greater accountability and student achievement, then why don't we also elect local superintendents instead of having them appointed by their local school boards?

Not only would my resolution make the selection of the state superintendent post consistent with local superintendent positions, it would also mirror the process of how administrators of other similar government agencies are chosen in the majority of states.

That would help create more accountability and cohesion between DPI and the Legislature. Because right now, it feels as though every time we've proposed meaningful changes to improve education in Wisconsin, DPI has pushed back by using the constitution as a crutch and the fact that its superintendent is a separately elected position.

That disconnect and lack of cooperation certainly isn't helping improve an education agency that many could argue is failing our state and our future workforce.

If DPI didn't always act like it was on an island all by itself, we could have greater collaboration with state entities like the Department of Workforce Development to tackle such issues as the noticeable skills gap problem in Wisconsin. Currently, the state has about 86,000 job openings that aren't being filled.

I also believe some students are not getting the education they deserve because DPI's one-size-fits-all approach is holding back local school districts and teachers by forcing them to constantly jump through hoops to comply with excessive regulatory burdens. If teachers and school administrators were able to focus all of their attention on their students, I'm confident the state's graduation rate would stop declining and our inadequate reading scores would improve.

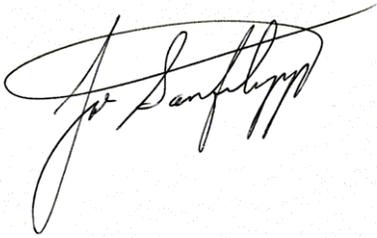
Another goal of my resolution is to take the politics out of selecting a DPI superintendent. Because the superintendent race occurs during spring elections, voter turnout is extremely low, which allows special interest groups to have more influence over who fills the position.

A few newspaper editorials have indicated the vast majority of Wisconsinites have no idea who heads DPI. That's completely understandable given that voter turnout has been as low as 13.74 percent in recent years. By making the superintendent an appointed position, it will bring education discussions into the governor's race and finally give the topic the attention it so desperately needs.

Another benefit is voters will have the final say in the process. Because my proposal calls for a constitutional amendment, the state electorate would have to ratify the change in a referendum. If citizens don't agree with the appointments, they also have the ability in the next election to replace the lawmakers who made those decisions.

Nevertheless, this change is simply not enough. We also need to decentralize authority in Madison by shrinking part of DPI's \$166.5 million annual operating budget. Those savings then could be sent directly to local classrooms in the form of per-pupil aid.

We owe it to the kids, parents and teachers of our state to have a school system that places more power at the local level and requires more accountability. That's precisely what we're expecting to achieve with these proposals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Sanfelippo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "S".