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## School Safety--It's Not Just for Students

*Editorial Column by Rep. Thiesfeldt*

A recent [investigative report](#) by Dan O'Donnell on News Talk 1130 WISN shared an all-too predictable scenario. Wisconsin teachers in some school districts are regularly being both verbally and physically assaulted by students and lack administrative support to confront the growing problem. According to the report, teachers fear for their students' and their own safety, and risk losing their jobs when they take a stand.

Evidence is mounting that satisfying a nationwide social justice agenda has become more important than appropriate discipline in our schools. As a result, the education of all our students is diminished and teachers have become pawns in a political game.

Much study has been done on the subject of bullying in our schools and the toxic stress this places on students' ability to learn. Lost in this important topic has been the growing problem of violence and threats against teachers. Our teachers are spending an increasing amount of their instructional time focusing on students who are disruptive in the classroom to the detriment of those who truly would like to learn.

Just as it is unacceptable for a student to feel unsafe at school, it is equally unacceptable for a teacher to feel the same. Evidence arising from Mr. O'Donnell's report is serious and must be confronted. Similar stories have arisen nationwide which have resulted in serious injuries and even deaths of teachers. Appropriate staff training in early intervention, crisis management and application of discipline must be a component of addressing this growing problem.

I agree with many experts who lay the increase in teacher-aimed violence at the feet of the U.S. Dept. of Justice (USDJ) Civil Rights Division. In a January 2014 letter, direct pressure from USDJ encouraged schools to re-examine student disciplinary policies for racial or ethnic disparities of application. If circumstantial evidence supports that a school has suspended, expelled or applied basic discipline of students disproportionately upon one racial or ethnic group over another, it could trigger a federal investigation, something no district wishes to endure.

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Except in the most extreme cases, schools have responded by simply eliminating suspension/expulsion from disciplinary measures rather than face a USDJ inquiry. Students know the rules aren't being enforced, and they also know that school administration is loathe to mete out appropriate punishment when federal dollars are at stake. The consequence of this is chaos in the classrooms.

The pressure from USDJ has empowered troubled students to be even more disruptive, has traumatized teachers who are discouraged from taking strong action, and diminished learning in the wider student body. The legislature must take action in the best interest of our teachers who want to teach and students who want to learn from them.

In coming months, as we approach the next legislative session, I will work with my colleagues and education professionals to address ways we can support our classroom teachers and encourage school administrators to deal with the surge of teacher-directed school violence. It is unacceptable for any school district to turn its back on the safety of teachers and students to suit a social agenda from Washington D.C.

School safety isn't just for students--it is for teachers, too. But it is also in society's best interest. This discussion must transcend political party affiliation and should be a topic of policy discussions in the coming months. Our children and teachers are too important to set this issue aside.