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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 52nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Legislative Oversight Necessary

A Column by Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt

Superintendent Sadoff recently wrote a column focused on education; a topic very close to my heart and central to my duties in the legislature. The theme was that several significant changes have been brought to Wisconsin public schools in recent years, and the frequency and intensity of the changes have the potential to do long-term damage regarding teacher morale and recruiting.

I respect Mr. Sadoff's eloquent dissent. However, the legislature does not have the luxury of focusing on only one component of the state budget. No agency of the state government has free rein of its realm nor receives a blank check to operate.

The idea that the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and our local school districts are best served by relative immunity from legislative oversight is the recipe that created the problems and subsequently the need for reform. For example, school boards would never have been able to enact the ACT 10 changes that continue to benefit our schools. School choice, independent charter and virtual school movements would never have originated within the walls of the DPI. Whether right or wrong, initiatives under way that would measure the accountability of schools, teachers, and administrators have been supported by voters, but never would have been put in place by those entities being held accountable.

If criticisms of state legislative interventions within our schools are to be fairly heard, one cannot ignore the largest intervention into education in decades—the Common Core Standards (CCS). Yet, when the federal government financially coerced DPI to adopt the CCS and testing, the education world was largely silent.

Trying to enact positive change within our schools through the normal legislative process is not disrespectful to teachers, superintendents or administrators. It is the legislature's job to do this as it does for other government agencies. Unfortunately, nearly every uninvited serious initiative is characterized as “disrespectful.” Rejecting the CCS, allowing alternatives to the state standardized test, or implementing teacher effectiveness evaluations shows no more disrespect to teachers than enacting a 70 MPH speed limit disrespects the State Patrol, changing sentencing guidelines disrespects judges, or establishing weight guidelines on roads disrespects farmers.

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Every effort expended by the legislature and the governor in education matters has been done with two goals in mind: widening educational options for students (especially low income) and providing quality education as efficiently as the taxpayers can afford.

It has been suggested that legislators who support school choice and charter schools are “trying to destroy public schools.” It is entirely reasonable to endorse the growth of school choice and charters alongside regular public schools. I do not believe these desires are mutually exclusive any more than one might choose to oppose a new publicly-financed basketball arena in Milwaukee and still claim to be a Bucks fan. I want our public schools to be adequately funded, but I also want to maintain the value private schools bring to our communities. Private schools do not seek the end of public education. Rather, they see themselves as complementary partners of the educational system and worthy of a portion of public investment.

In spite of the growth of school choice, enrollment in private schools has been declining for nearly 20 years. Not possessing the taxing authority of school districts, private schools have been hit disproportionately hard due to the rising cost of education in the last 45 years. Each privately-funded student that transfers to public school increases public costs by thousands of dollars. Conversely, Fond du Lac School District for years has been receiving additional state aid because of the cost savings resulting from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Thousands of parents pay taxes to fund public education and also privately fund their children’s education.

Mr. Sadoff is almost correct--investment, respect and time are necessary to develop our greatest resource: “our children.” We must invest adequate funding in options that fit the needs of students. We must show due respect to all educators for the important work they perform, and they should respect the role of the legislature as well. Unfortunately, time is a harsh master. Time well-spent on good policy will bear fruit, but bad policy must be rerouted quickly, no matter the time and cost already invested--doing any less would be disrespectful to students.