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## Creating Blame

Editorial Column by Rep. Thiesfeldt

The State Assembly Republicans announced last May that restoring K-12 funding was our top budget priority. I worked with other legislators to accomplish this goal, which resulted in a restoration of proposed budget cuts and a \$200 million increase in school funding.

Last November, a Fond du Lac Reporter article related how several local school districts had increased property taxes because a small number of low income families had qualified for the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP). The article included the misleading statement that the Fond du Lac School District (FDLSD) “increased its tax levy \$379,407 due to private school voucher students.”

Very few people fully understand nor can explain the process of school finance, much less major changes to that process. The article took advantage of that complexity to mislead the readers, whether intentional or not, to put the WPCP in a negative light.

In response to the article, there are two facts to remember. First, the school district levy is voluntary, there is no mandated level of taxation as the article implied. Second, the districts levied beyond the costs of the WPCP, profiting from students that are no longer enrolled, or never were enrolled in district schools.

In short, the districts charged local taxpayers more than necessary to cover lost state aid, and the Reporter justified the higher tax bills by printing a misleading story attempting to place the blame on the WPCP.

Here are the numbers: The FDLSD has an overall budget of more than \$100 million in 2015-16. The State withheld \$314,000 from its aid payment to the district to pay for the 41 low-income students who qualified for the WPCP. This is less than 1/3 of 1% of the district budget. The district took advantage (and then some) of the opportunity to recoup lost state aid by charging local property taxpayers nearly \$380,000; \$65,000 more than the State’s deduction.

I have always stated that the choice programs are a positive for Wisconsin. Students are educated at a lower cost and access to more educational choices yields greater parent satisfaction and improved outcomes.

*Serving the communities of Fond du Lac, Oakfield, Byron, Empire, Taycheedah, and the western half of Calumet township*

Cost savings are also realized by maximizing available classroom space within our communities. Filling empty classrooms in WPCP schools slows the school district's need for expensive building projects. Building projects at WPCP schools are entirely borne by the private sector.

Lastly, those critical of the WPCP are being inconsistently selective. The funding of the WPCP was designed to mirror the long-standing Open Enrollment program. FDLSD lost \$867,000 in state aid in '14-15 due to students choosing to attend other schools through the state's Open Enrollment program. Though the concept is the same--allowing parents to pick a school that best suits their needs—I hear no equivalent outcry to end the Open Enrollment program even though it costs the district significantly more.

In America today, people are demanding choices. Education is no exception. In order to efficiently provide for more educational choices, we must conclude all good schools are worthy of some level of public financial support. Good schools need adequate funding as they assist parents in educating their children; dedicated teachers need fair compensation, good training and parental support; good parents need to be actively engaged in school governance; students need parents to hold them to high standards. Cooperation amongst all these entities will yield students that possess the skills our workforce requires, but, more importantly will sustain and advance the American tradition by passing the keys of freedom to coming generations.