

Regardless of political affiliation, one thing that most folks can agree about is our need to rebuild our state and national economy and create jobs. How we do that is subject to much debate. In my opinion, it is simple: if we want to restore our economic dominance in a global market we must start with the next generation of Americans. We need to give them the skills and knowledge necessary to take on every other country and beat them hands down in technology and manufacturing, period.

I call the next generation the do-or-die generation. They will be charged with a daunting task: take on all foreign competitors and take no prisoners. No more goods manufactured in China lining our store shelves, no more Middle East oil, no more unfair trade deals. This much is sure: we must put our differences aside in politics and focus on giving the next generation of Americans our full attention.

The vocational high school diploma bill (SS-AB/SB-18) allows school boards to grant a vocational high school diploma in addition to the standard diploma. The legislation will allow high schools to come up with curriculum in specific fields, welding for example, and allow a student to learn a trade and earn a vocational diploma while still in high school. It is not a mandate, and DPI will have to approve the curriculum thus providing oversight to make sure the students are getting a proper education. Different parts of our state would be free to develop area-specific vocations to offer their students. In my district in western Wisconsin welding is big. In other parts of the state, health care and other technology fields may dominate the local economy. Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and home health aide programs would fit all parts of the state. It is also important to note that the diploma will allow entry into the military and technical colleges, this question has been asked of me several times and I want to put that issue to rest.

There is a term sometimes used called the “forgotten half.” This refers to the large number of students that will not go on to a 4 year college or tech school. They are not unintelligent or lazy, but many of them feel no point to being in high school. The schools do what they can to help these students, however, the model they are working with simply means putting these kids back in the same classes that are meant to prepare them for a 4 year college, where they have no desire to go to in the first place. These students either quit or simply go through the paces to graduation. These students struggle to find employment when they graduate. This bill gives these students a reason to come to school. That diploma will truly mean something to them.

Learning a trade should not be looked down upon. Learning a trade is something that should be looked at with great pride. Our economy depends on skilled workers and we should be giving students the ability to learn a trade while they are still in high school and thus a captive audience. Students I talk with are excited about the opportunity. They understand that just because they earn a vocational diploma as a CNA or a welder they don't have to do that the rest of their life, they can still go on to further schooling, they can change careers, they can do whatever they want to, but it gives them an all important start. A start that could mean all the difference in their lives.

I have talked with many employers who overwhelmingly tell me that they would hire many new employees right now if they could find applicants that had at least a base of skills. Unfortunately they are not finding that right now. We need to change that. These employers tell me that they would like to get more involved with schools and that this new look at education will cause them to renew their relationship with their local high schools. It is this business/school collaboration that will allow for the money and

equipment that is necessary for training. On top of business support I see collaboration between current tech schools and our high schools expanding. Tech schools should be sending instructors into our schools and with current technology students can participate in tech training while seated in any high school classroom via internet feed. This bill is a step in the right direction. I hope that it simply the starting point in changing how we look at education for the next generation of Wisconsin students. I believe that leaders, skilled workers and entrepreneurs will all flow from this concept.

Vocational diplomas offer a fresh new look and a new perspective for Wisconsin schools. The time to try different educational models is now. If we are committed to manufacturing and industry and jobs in our state, and if we are committed to buying American-made products, then we as Americans need to look to the next generation of students, those in middle schools right now, as the key and give them what they need to succeed. Teach them a skill and they will deliver. They are the next generation of Americans and with our help they will restore economic dominance for our country again.

Please remember the following:

1. This bill is not a mandate. It simply allows citizen elected school boards to make a decision on whether a vocational diploma program makes sense for their school district and their students.
2. This is a state law authorizing a Wisconsin high school diploma. You can go to any technical college with it and join the military with it.
3. School Boards must get their vocational program curriculum approved by DPI, thus allowing for DPI oversight to make sure the programs don't shortchange students.
4. The bill gives school districts flexibility and will encourage technical college and business collaboration.
5. Mainstreaming these programs and this vocational diploma will give them credibility. The existing programs have not gone far enough.
6. Offering a vocation specific diploma will give students something to be proud of and a reason to come to school. That diploma will mean something to them and that motivation might just be all it takes for their success.
7. We can create thousands of new jobs but without skilled workers to fill them our economy will continue to struggle and our jobs will go overseas.

I respectfully ask for your support on SS-AB/SB 18.

Rep. Mark Radcliffe