

Supporting Teachers and Strengthening Schools

Today's newsletter is focused on one of the pillars of this campaign that really lights me up: supporting teachers and strengthening public schools. This is perfect timing for a newsletter on this theme, as just this week I was endorsed by the Wisconsin Education Association Council, an organization that advocates for teachers and public schools. While I have much to say about supporting high-quality preschools, technical colleges, and the UW system, in this newsletter I'll focus on our public K-12 schools.

I call myself a lifelong educator because I've been teaching in one capacity or another my entire adult life. I played basketball in college and worked at enough summer camps to know that I loved teaching kids, so my first job after graduation was as a girls' varsity assistant basketball coach. I helped our team go deep into the state playoffs and was offered the head coaching position after the season. By then I had decided to go to graduate school in a different state, so I declined the offer, but I continued to coach during summers with an AAU team.

I absolutely loved coaching. It was such a thrill to explain to young players how to maximize their skills and to show them how to strategize around an opponent's weaknesses, all while having fun—and occasional struggles—working together. It was my experiences in basketball that taught me that a good leader makes those around them better and gets the most out of the people they're leading, not through fear or intimidation but by fostering relationships and connection, by inspiring others to be their best, and by modeling and encouraging joy. This is what all of my great teachers have done for me, and it's why I consider teaching to be a sacred profession: when done right, teaching is the art of helping others become more alive to the world around them. This is what is at stake when we talk about education.

The fact is that if we were to set out to design a public school system that would do its best to extinguish teachers' passions and create difficult conditions for students, we might create our current model. Teachers and support staff are no longer able to advocate for their working conditions. The only way to get a fair wage is to jump from district to district, something that is understandable at the individual level but that diminishes the community-building that is so important to an institution's culture. And students' social, emotional, and intellectual needs are too often going unaddressed. Schools are being starved of the resources they need to do the most basic functions of their jobs, and we have tolerated a culture of antagonism toward teachers and other staff. How did we get here? And what can we do to right the ship?

The assault on public schools has a long history, but the biggest change in Wisconsin was Act 10, which stripped teachers and most other public employees of their collective bargaining rights. When Scott Walker diminished the labor power of teachers and support staff in this state, he struck a blow to the foundation on which the strength of our schools is built. But in hindsight, this was just the first hit.

The second major blow has been the systematic defunding of our public schools through the dramatic expansion of “school choice” via vouchers. According to the Wisconsin Education Network: While both needs and costs have increased greatly, when adjusted for inflation, state funding for public schools remains below 2009 levels of spending. We also know that we are dramatically under-funding the areas where student needs are greatest: in addressing student mental health, and providing funding for students with disabilities, students in poverty, and students who are English language learners.

Given the state of the world, the challenges in our communities, and the lingering effects of COVID, I want to highlight the need for much more mental health support in our schools. Just last night, a local teacher told me about the challenges of trying to meet student needs when some kids are grappling with profound PTSD due to their home lives. She said that she recently had to rock an eight-year-old girl to calm her enough so that she would be able to move on to the next part of her day. Imagine how that would feel. You’re trying to teach subject content to a room full of children; meanwhile some of them are grappling with the profound effects of addiction, their parents’ mental health challenges, economic vulnerability, and who knows what else. People who get up every day and worry about, care for, and teach other people’s children deserve dignified compensation and our utmost respect and support. They also deserve to have the support staff they need to help students learn.

I also hear from people that they’re frustrated by the inadequacies and struggles of our public schools. I get it. But we need to be realistic that trying to financially support two systems—a private voucher system and a public system—is completely unaffordable. It’s like buying a second home because you’re unhappy with parts of your first home that you’ve neglected and haven’t cared for. What do we think will happen to the first home? What is the long-term plan under this funding model? What will the effects be over time? We are draining public schools to subsidize private schools, and when our local schools can’t pay their bills, lawmakers in Madison say that the district should go to referendum. We, the taxpayers, are being asked to increase our taxes to further support a broken system. Every school referendum is another example of the failure of lawmakers in Madison.

Yes, parents should always have a choice in where they send their kids. Parents can homeschool or they can pay to send their kids to private school. (This is how we used to do things, back when public schools were adequately funded.)

The public school system needs a fundamental transformation, and rural areas make this exceedingly clear. Here, most everyone in a community goes to the same schools, no matter how much money we make, so we know more than people in suburban communities that we’re all in this together. Even if we could afford it, we can’t just pick up and move into an adequately funded district to avoid problems in our local schools. If we feel that our public schools aren’t living up to what we want for our kids, we have to commit to working together to fix what’s broken. And let’s be clear: our teachers and our kids are not the problem. The fact is that the most broken part of our school system is our legislature.

There was a time when Wisconsin schools were the envy of the Midwest. We can get back there. Restoring collective bargaining and fixing our broken funding formulas are key to turning this ship around, and fairer maps give us a shot.