

Our Children's Future: School Visit and Community Forum Raise Questions

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Sen. Vinehout writes about the future of our children in a time when public schools face a serious financial squeeze. □ Children are eager to learn but their schools struggle with staff shortages and out-of-date equipment. State aid to public schools has declined as costs rise and more dollars are being siphoned off for private schools. Are we doing the best we can for the future of our children?

ALMA - "Your future awaits," the Student Council President said as he handed students the schedule for Career Day. He then led me to the computer lab where my first class waited.

I spent the morning sharing my life as state Senator with many intelligent, interested young adults. They were as eager to learn about public service as I was to share. Many of them never thought about a career as an elected official.

More than a few left the classroom wondering why any adult would choose not to vote. In part, this was due to the recent local election of one of their teachers – by one vote.

As I watched students respond, I understood the magic that happens in the classroom. Bringing community members from all of walks of life into the school opened a window for students into a career many had never considered.

I spoke with mostly middle school students: an age I dearly love.

The world of a young person expands every day. I watched students making connections and forming opinions as we shared. My world touched theirs.

And, if for no other reason than their own teacher's experience of winning by one vote, I experienced how youth embraced their own role as citizens. By embracing the expanding world of knowledge and the youngsters' role within our world, I saw the foundation of democracy emerge: an educated citizenry.

I saw the magic of opening minds in the bright eyes and eager questions of the students. And looking around the classroom, I saw the possibilities and the challenges.

The computer lab was filled with old cathode ray computer monitors. The best machines were discards from a college in Minnesota. After my three classes concluded, I took the opportunity to speak with several staff members. I learned about the aging school buses - one of which was 36 years old. In the last 12 years, the district cut a 1/3 of its staff. State aid was only a third of what it had been 13 years ago.

One remaining staff member told me, "We have tremendous community support. Volunteers do all sorts of jobs to keep things looking nice...but there are some things they just can't do" - like buying a badly needed new furnace.

The evening before Career Day I was in Eau Claire participating as a panelist for the forum: Our Schools, Our Community: the state of education in Wisconsin. I joined school experts, the local school board president, an education professor, and private and public school superintendents.

I heard much about the funding problems facing public schools. Eau Claire lost \$5 million in state aid just since 2011. Eau Claire is running the same operation in 2014 as in 2006 – with the same amount of money. But we all know costs went up. Special education used to be reimbursed at 72% state funds. Now schools receive 26%. Some districts spend \$21,000 a year to educate students with a mil rate of under 3 million; other schools spend \$9,000 with a mil rate of about 9.

There was much discussion about the use of public education dollars for private schools. Many participants were surprised to learn for 30 years Eau Claire sent state aid to Milwaukee for private schools. This year the state required cost will be almost \$1 million.

Panelists spent time discussing differences between publically funded private schools and public schools. Audience members asked questions about unequal standards and testing. Some were concerned about too much emphasis on testing.

"What country leads the world in innovation and patents?" the superintendent asked the crowd. A woman from the audience shouted back, "the United States".

He then asked, "What happens when our future leaders only know how to take multiple choices tests?"

Professor Julie Mead summed up the evening's conversation when she said, "There is a state constitutional right to public education. Its overriding purpose is an educated citizenry. We all benefit from having an educated citizenry."

I thought of this as I watched the bright, intelligent eyes of the young people in my classroom-for-the-day.

Your future awaits. What have we done today to make your best possible tomorrow?

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