http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/teaching-students-s5.jpg

Wisconsin should follow the lead of Minnesota and make crucial investment in all levels of education. During a recent legislative forum in Chippewa Falls, Rep. Kathy Bernier (R-Chippewa Falls) walked out because of comments made comparing Minnesota and Wisconsin. Sen. Kathleen Vinehout shares why the conversation was important to the overall discussion of school funding.

CHIPPEWA FALLS, WI - “We hired a great inorganic chemistry professor last year,” Mike, a UW-River Falls chemistry professor, told me. “Unfortunately she’s leaving in May for St. Olaf.” I visited St. Olaf in Northfield, Minnesota. They have a great chemistry department.

Mike told me his department used to have 15 professors. They now have 11 – soon to be 10. They plan to replace the person leaving but it’s getting harder to recruit and retain faculty.

The consequences of deep budget cuts to education are disparate but all around us.

Deep budget cuts to the UW system results in fewer course offerings and programs, larger classes and less staff. UW Extension is proposing to remove extension agents from many rural counties. The UW Madison Ag program announced the loss of the only dairy sheep program in the country. Faculty are moving on to greener pastures.

There is a similar story in K-12 education.

I spoke with Katie, an Eau Claire special education teacher who serves on the district’s compensation committee. The committee is working to find money to keep teachers. Katie said, “No raise in seven years is really hard for a lot of families.” Katie worked with an “amazing” special education teacher hired seven years ago who makes less than recently hired teachers.

Like so many other school districts, Eau Claire is considering options for a fall referendum. With declining state aid and rising costs, people across the state have voted to raise property taxes to keep their schools operating.

Alma passed a 38% increase in the school portion of property taxes to pay for a new furnace and keep the lights on.

Other school districts' referenda aren't successful. Prescott just lost a referendum to cover operating costs. They now face $1.5 million in additional cuts – over 10% of the district budget. Local people worry more teachers will leave for Minnesota – a state making significant investments in education.

At a recent Chippewa Valley legislative forum with local school officials, one of my colleagues abruptly left
the event upset about a school board member's comments that Minnesota was doing better financially than Wisconsin.

Specifically the board member mentioned Minnesota's $1 billion budget surplus, funding for education and the big difference between the two states with regard to the prison population. The two states have a similar population and crime rate but Wisconsin incarcerates more than double the number of individuals.

My legislative colleague thought it unfair to compare. But is it?

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, in Wisconsin 87% of children with at least one parent lacking a high school education are likely to be living in poverty. In Minnesota, 32% of children live in poverty while 39% of Wisconsin children live in poverty.

Among the risks of poverty is lack of education achievement, which can negatively affect life opportunities. Studies show that low education attainment and low incomes can increase the

risk of incarceration. Minnesota incarcerates fewer individuals while Wisconsin spends more on prisons than on the UW system.

It is wiser to invest in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Poor children need resources – books, teacher time, health care, and food – things that cost money, which brings us back to school funding.

At the forum, we discussed needed changes to the school funding formula. I reminded everyone that State Superintendent Tony Evers submitted in his budget a proposal to change the formula called Fair Funding for Our Future.

Mr. Evers described his proposal as containing “a number of provisions to fix the funding formula by investing in all students, protecting rural and declining enrollment districts, making adjustments in the aid formula to account for poverty, providing property tax relief and increasing general school aid.”

This is the third time he introduced this proposal. It is the third time Governor Walker and the Majority in the Legislature chose not to pass it.

Education budget cuts end up costing us more. As state funds shift from education to safety (prisons and law enforcement), it becomes harder to break out of the cycle.

But break out of it we must. The investments we make in a child’s future don’t just help one family. The investments help all of us.