Be True To Your School

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The week of February 27th to March 3rd is Public Schools Week, and Senator Smith discusses how successful public schools make for thriving families and communities.

MADISON - School pride dies hard. Even now, many years after my high school graduation, when I hear of an Eau Claire North Husky that has been awarded for their success, I get a twinge of pride. At face value, that may seem irrational, but as I've traveled around western Wisconsin, I've found pride in one's school and one's community to be universal.

Whether you grew up in a city like Eau Claire and graduated a Husky or an Old Abe, or if you went to school in a smaller community like Elmwood, Trempealeau, Prescott or Arcadia, it's a source of pride when a young person from your school does well. (And speaking of school pride –you're already bristling if your school wasn't mentioned in those examples, right?) Whether you currently have school-aged children or not, we are all influenced by our public schools by what they produce: our next generation of leaders.

The week of February 27th to March 3rd is Public Schools Week, a time to reflect on and celebrate the educational institutions that play a central role in our lives. It's at school we all first

learn to be a good citizen, and school that gives us a first exposure to life outside our families. Our public schools have an enormous impact on the future of our communities, and it is important that we do all we can to strengthen them.

You may see signs out there that say “Public Schools Unite Us.” When public schooling took shape in this country, its goal was to create an even footing by which Americans could succeed regardless of the circumstances of their upbringing. Through generations of students, those goals have not changed.

So what makes a great public school? It starts with teachers and staff who dedicate their professional lives to guiding the next generation. I’m sure many of you can immediately recall a teacher you had who opened up new worlds to you, or provided you with an example of the kind of adult you would like to be.

But if we are not properly funding our schools, we are impairing our school staff and school administrators in their efforts. As a legislator, I have heard from many public school teachers and administrators that they are simply not getting the funding they need to do their jobs. Wisconsin’s school funding formula is broken, resulting in radically different amounts of per-student aid depending on which school district they attend.

When the state does not supply districts with adequate funding, it falls to school boards to make up the shortfall. This leaves districts in a bind, forced to introduce community referenda to raise property taxes. This is where an already-unequal situation can become worse. School districts in wealthy areas can afford these referenda to raise their school’s budget, while those in poorer areas cannot.

These band-aid fixes are unsustainable. A child’s quality of education should not depend on what district they attend. We can live up to the promise of a great education by providing adequate funding to every school districts so they can help students excel.



Another concerning development I have heard from many teachers is the prevalence of testing

in our schools. Treating all children as though they are all the same is not the best way to evaluate outcomes for students who have different talents and capacities.

Not all children learn in the same way, and not all do well in a standard testing situation. Where there is a place for tests to evaluate student success, it's important to stay realistic about what these tests can reliably measure, and not overload our kids with endless testing in place of learning. They should be places of personal growth where students can learn to be their best selves.

Every kid deserves an equal opportunity, no matter where they live. When our public schools are successful, the result is thriving families and communities. So this week, dust off your spirit wear – your school needs your support.

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