

Back to School Provides Some Food for Thought

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LA CROSSE, WI - With the ringing of school bells and the roar of high school football games, students across Wisconsin are heading back to class. But in many classrooms, the start of school is also marked by the rumbling of empty stomachs.

Amid all of the headlines about state budget cuts and teacher shortages, many schools are struggling to deal with the challenge of student hunger. It is a crisis that has worsened dramatically over the past several years as participation rates for free and reduced school meals have skyrocketed. Over 350,000 Wisconsin children, more than 43 percent of all students, now qualify for free and reduced meals.

Schools and communities across Wisconsin are doing their best to address this issue despite declining state support. Many parents, teachers and local businesses have stepped up to organize their own school meal programs, stock student food pantries and supply backpacks with meals for children struggling with hunger at home.

The community efforts being undertaken to combat student hunger are commendable, but they are a sign of the larger economic and financial challenges facing our state. Combined with Wisconsin's shrinking middle class and the decline in family wages, state budget cuts to school funding are having a noticeable impact.

One proposal to help address the crisis of student hunger was recently introduced by Rep. **Andy Jorgensen**

(D-Milton) and Sen.

Janis Ringhand

(D-Evansville). Commonly referred to as the "Food for Thought Act," Assembly Bill 234 seeks to increase school breakfast program enrollment and provide more children with access to a quality meal. Given the well-established correlation between hunger and low academic

achievement, the “Food for Thought Act” is helping to spark a much-needed discussion about this important topic.

It’s clear that we need to take a close look at how student funding cuts and increasing poverty rates are affecting classroom learning. Instead of taking more resources away from Wisconsin children, we must work together to invest in local schools, reduce student hunger and improve student achievement.

For too long, Republicans have prioritized tax cuts for the wealthy at the expense of funding for our schools and communities. In recent months, Gov. Walker’s presidential ambitions have overshadowed the real challenges facing families and distracted from our ability to find solutions to this growing crisis.

It is high time we focus on the important issues affecting Wisconsin families and local schools. Together, we can work to end childhood hunger in Wisconsin and provide all hardworking students the opportunity to succeed.

Jennifer Shilling serves as the Senate Democratic Leader and represents the 32nd District which covers La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford and parts of Monroe County.

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