
Commemorating Black History Month

By Dr. Lowell Holtz, Candidate for Wisconsin's Superintendent of Public Instruction

As we begin to celebrate Black History Month, I would like to reflect on Martin Luther King's philosophy on campaigning for real change and his work seeking freedom for all people.

Having studied Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail, I believe he would be appalled at the current superintendent's lack of leadership and action in helping our neighbors who live in areas with failing schools. In his April 16, 1963, letter Dr. King wrote, "In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) Collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; (2) Negotiation; (3) Self-purification; and (4) Direct action" (p. 2). He proceeded to write, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (p.5).

Over the course of my run for Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have had the opportunity to talk with many people from our large urban areas. Unanimously, they indicated they did not want someone from Madison walking into their city to tell them how to fix their educational issues. We need to have honest conversations with the parents, community leaders, and educators to collect the facts about the challenges facing their neighborhoods and schools. My experience as an administrator in rural, urban, and suburban districts taught me that "one-size DOES NOT fit all" when it comes to improving educational performance. A prudent leader takes time to engage a community and learn what its members are experiencing – both positive and negative – before implanting change.

At a macro level, I have also spoken with many members of the state legislature about their ideas and priorities to improve educational opportunities for all of Wisconsin's children. As your next superintendent, I vow to be an active partner with the legislature, working together with affected communities to collect the facts, to have open and honest dialog about the educational environment (self-purification) and how the community would like to proceed, and to finally develop and implement a successful plan, unique to each community. This process never happened with the Opportunity Schools Partnership Program, and the plan of another challenger is equally ill-advised with its top-down approach. In his letter, Martin Luther King, Jr., decried the "white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice," and who "paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom" (p. 7). I believe in the talents of my neighbors, and our collective wisdom, far more than the genius of any central planner and his heavy hand.

Wresting control of community schools with big hammers and remote-control levers is rarely a wise answer. Under my leadership, support teams of experienced educators will be available for those who ask for guidance. School districts will be given access to the tools

they need to take back the hallways and give teachers the time to do what they do best – teach – instead of filling out endless student reports.

Under my leadership, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction will no longer operate under a culture of 'power over.' The culture will change to one of 'power with' – power with every concerned parent, teacher and administrator working together to bring about meaningful educational reform for our children. We will work together to name problems when they arise, take ownership and then fix them.

A transcript of Letter from the Birmingham Jail may be found at: [Link](#)

Dr. Holtz is a candidate for Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin. He has taught in classrooms, been recognized as a Wisconsin Principal of the Year, and has led district improvement efforts as Superintendent of the Palmyra-Eagle, Beloit, and Whitnall School Districts. He spent much of his childhood in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood, and is the son of a retired Milwaukee Police Officer. Lowell is married to Dr. Susan Holtz, his high school sweetheart and wife of 36 years, and together they have raised five grown children. In addition to his roles in education, Dr. Holtz has over two decades of experience in law enforcement.

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