



Wisconsin Family Ties

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Contact: Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director – (608) 320-6165; joanne@wifamilyties.org

Understanding the IDEA is a Required Qualification for Secretary of Education

Madison, WI – In Tuesday night’s Senate confirmation hearing for U.S. Secretary of Education, nominee Betsy DeVos proved unable to answer fundamental questions regarding the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), raising grave concerns about her qualifications for the position. Students with disabilities across Wisconsin and across the United States depend on the IDEA for their right to a free, appropriate public education.

“Students with disabilities, whether their challenges are emotional or physical or intellectual, need strong leadership to champion their full participation in the public education at the heart of our democracy,” said Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director for Wisconsin Family Ties. “Unfortunately, Betsy DeVos said repeatedly that meeting the requirements of the IDEA should be left to states to decide. Her statements reveal either a serious lack of knowledge about fundamental education law, or a deeply-disturbing future direction signaling an unwillingness to carry out this crucial responsibility of the Department of Education.”

DeVos’ statements also raise concerns about past proposals to federalize special needs voucher funding, for programs such as the newly-implemented Wisconsin special needs vouchers that were opposed by disability organizations statewide, including Wisconsin Family Ties. A proposal known as the CHOICE Act would funnel federal IDEA funding into private voucher schools but sever that funding from any responsibility to abide by the IDEA itself.

Not only does the IDEA guarantee a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, families also have recourse in case of disputes. Wisconsin Family Ties often works with families whose students rely on the IDEA protections regarding school disciplinary practices, including the right to have their disability taken into account when expulsion is being considered.

“Wisconsin’s most vulnerable students and their families rely on the IDEA, and on the Department of Education that oversees it,” concluded Juhnke. “Parents are using the word ‘terrifying’ to describe Tuesday’s hearing, and those concerns must be front and center as committee members take their votes.”

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About Wisconsin Family Ties

Wisconsin Family Ties, Wisconsin’s family voice for children’s mental health, is a parent-run nonprofit organization serving families that include children with social, emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges. Founded in 1987, its mission is to enhance lives by promoting children’s mental health.

Wisconsin’s family voice for children’s mental health

16 North Carroll Street, Suite 230 • Madison, WI 53703 • 608.267.6800 or 800.422.7145 • www.wifamilyties.org

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