



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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School Safety Requires More Social Workers

By State Representative Don Vruwink

In the last legislative session, the Legislature approved \$100 million in new funds for student safety. Ninety-seven percent of public schools and 40 percent of private schools applied for the first round of grants and all are expected to receive funding.

While structural upgrades are important, we have another security measure to address: the mental and emotional health of our students. If we can address the problems at an early age, it will help all of society down the road.

When school safety legislation was debated on the Assembly floor in March of this year, I stood up and spoke about the emotional well-being of our children. As a long-time teacher and coach, I've seen many students struggle with problems at home as well as in their social life at school.

I've seen students show up at school very early just to get out of the home. I've seen a child leave her home very late at night to escape abuse from her father.

I've seen students suffer from depression, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness.

That is why I'm pleased to see that the Wisconsin Department of Justice is including mental health training for teachers in its grant program.

I also support the Department of Public Instruction's budget proposal to provide \$60 million in funding for mental health education and school social workers. The proposal includes \$44 million in additional school aid for social workers and mental health staff, \$5 million to teach students to recognize the symptoms of mental health problems so that they and their friends can seek help before a crisis develops, and \$3.25 million for school-based mental health services.

Teachers, support staff, and administrators care deeply about the safety of their students, but they are over-stretched, and children with emotional problems may slip through the cracks. We need more in-house social workers to assist troubled children who do not have strength and support at

home. When troubled children lash out at school, it hurts *all* children. It prevents *all* children from getting the best education possible.

Historically, Wisconsin has been a leader in public education investment. Now is the time to become a leader again. By investing in the mental and emotional well-being of our students, we can ensure a brighter future for all.

Rep. Don Vruwink represents Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and surrounding townships in the State Assembly.

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