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It is Time for Education to be a Top Priority Again

By Rep. Gary Hebl

Since the passage of Act 10 just two months into Governor Walker's tenure, it has been clear that quality public education was not and has never been a top priority for his administration. After passing Act 10, we lost countless years of teaching experience from teacher retirements- over 1,000 years of experience lost in Sun Prairie alone. Since then, there has been one constant in Walker's administration: favoring big business and unaccountable charter schools over public education and average Wisconsin residents.

Since 2011, K-12 children have seen over *one billion dollars* in reduced funding, including a \$426.5 million cut in Walker's first budget alone. Schools have gone to referenda (and school districts have passed them) at alarmingly increased rates since 2011, mostly to find money to keep the lights on in their schools. All the while, the legislative majority party has fallen over themselves to use taxpayer money to fund unaccountable charter schools, as well as pay off businesses like Foxconn and Kimberly Clark. We need to revisit and completely rethink the priorities of this state- instead of kowtowing to the powerful, we must champion the people.

Education is the bedrock of our society. No issue is as important as the education of our children. We live in a rapidly advancing society, and we need to ensure that our school kids grow up with skills they need to succeed. We need forward thinkers to get us through the next century. We need the problem solvers who will find a cure for diseases such as cancer and AIDS, who will find a solution to climate change, and who will discover viable long term solutions for renewable energy. There is an enormous amount of progress that still needs to be made. That is why we must reinvest in education.

Now, in the fight for his political life, Governor Walker is trying to position himself as the "education governor." Despite this campaign rhetoric, the fact is that had we simply continued with the levels from before his tenure, education funding would be in a better position than it is today.

This isn't even to mention the cuts to technical schools or the UW System. That Governor Walker thinks he can fool Wisconsin citizens by calling himself an "education governor" is laughable. What we need in Wisconsin is a leader who sees the impact of strong public education on the state's school children, not one who only sees it in terms of election strategy.

I sit on the Assembly Education Committee and I am constantly seeing smart, prudent legislation put forward for my fellow Democrats that would strengthen Wisconsin's education system. Almost without fail, the majority party flatly refuses to even hold a public hearing on those bills. The members of the majority party take a non-compromise, we-know-best attitude. What we need in Wisconsin is a shift in thinking, away from thinking about what will best benefit for-profit corporations and back to trusting in our public schools by leaning in to what they are doing well and working with them when there are areas that need improvement. We need to listen to those that actually do the work to figure out how to fix problems. If we can work together in the Legislature and actually listen to stakeholders, there's no telling how far our school children will go.

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