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Editorial: Is Wisconsin giving up on public schools?

Ours is a disposable society: Water bottles, cameras, diapers, contact lenses ... We use 'em, abuse 'em and toss 'em. Now we're adding public education to the list. In Wisconsin, we're slowly sidelining our schools, continuing to fund them, yes, but at rates that fail to keep pace with the rising cost of health care, gasoline and groceries.

It's a gradual, incremental disposal. Here in Ripon, we'll see evidence of it Monday, June 17, when the school district has to approve a preliminary budget requiring more than \$400,000 in budget cuts. A custodial position may be eliminated, and we may see some retrenchment in the Ripon Middle and High schools' art programs. Half an early-childhood teacher position may be cut.

Schools reducing positions and programs is not necessarily unhealthy. There's nothing wrong with juggling priorities, re-evaluating returns on investment and trying to do more with less. Folks in the private and public sectors are working in a lean world that, to remain competitive, continually seeks greater efficiencies; replaces human capital with technology; and asks employees with health insurance to have a greater stake in the cost-care ratio.

But the reason we can't afford to pay for our children's public education — despite a projected state budget surplus of \$560 million — is that we need to squirrel away more of our hard-earned coins to help pay for a second, private system of education.

Wisconsin state legislators are scheduled this week to decide whether to approve an expanded voucher program that calls for more of your tax dollars going into other people's pockets so they can send their children to private, for-profit and in some cases, religious schools.

This is wrong on several levels. But the primary problem is that rather than improve our public education, we shun it by redirecting extra dollars to a new system of privately run schools that not only aren't as accountable to publicly agreed upon standards, but that also have failed to prove more effective in educating children.

Despite his 2010 campaign promise, Gov. Scott "I will strip policy from the state budget" Walker wrongly inserted the voucher-expansion proposal along with what the Legislative Fiscal Bureau identified as 57 other policy items into his two-year, \$68.2 billion budget bill. ...

Last week the Joint Finance Committee voted 14-2 to revoke funding for a new statewide student information system it had approved in 2011 — Infinite Campus, the system Ripon School District uses — and instead, allow multiple companies (including Wisconsin's own Skyward, Inc.) to do the work.

Ripon's state Sen. Luther Olsen once more displayed his backbone by not only voting in the minority and but arguing that Wisconsin should not be viewed as a state that reneges on its decisions based on political pressure. He likened

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legislators' cave-in to the Stevens Point-based company that originally lost the bid to Infinite Campus as moving Wisconsin closer toward being viewed as a "banana republic."

But the dismantling of the planned single system for measuring student achievement makes it more difficult to compare schools' performance at the very time state legislators are shifting dollars from public to private schools. ... Julie Mead, chairperson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, points out the "choice" that proponents use to defend public vouchers for private schools implies the right to shop for a school, not the right to a good education. This enables the governor and legislators to wash their hands of the issue of quality by just championing choice (which parents already enjoy through open enrollment). After they hand out the vouchers, lawmakers can wash their hands again of what they perceive to be damaged, distasteful public schools — granting them the same respect afforded spent cameras, empty water bottles and dirty diapers.

— Tim Lyke

To read the entire editorial, see the June 6, 2013 edition of The Ripon Commonwealth Press.

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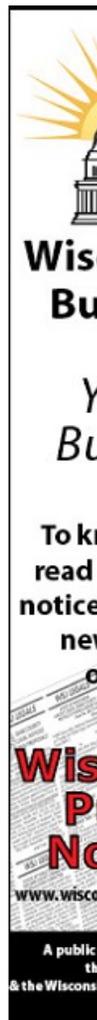
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