

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, September 20, 2021

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DPI-NR 2021-55

Don't let legislative leadership undermine public education in our state

A message from State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly to the people of Wisconsin

This is a special time of year for children, families, and educators. I know, as an educator and as a parent, that the transition back to school can be a challenging time, and this year, of course, the challenges are far greater than ever before, and our educators and students are rising to them.

And while they do that, while they take on the common challenges of a new school year and the extraordinary ones stemming from returning to school during a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, the legislative leadership in our state is taking on a different challenge – the challenge of undermining public education for their own political gain. I've said it before and I'll say it again: these legislators are using our children as playthings in a political game, and they will not win, but they will hurt our students, our educators, and our democratic principles in the process. Because by attempting to undermine public education by ramming through controversial, misguided, and unexamined bills through the legislative process without providing ample opportunity for public input, they are ultimately undermining democracy and robbing Wisconsinites of their right to civic participation.

It's ironic, really, since one of the egregiously fast-tracked bills currently making its way through the legislature is a bill about civics, and it includes a stipulation concerning curriculum that teaches “an understanding of the process for effectively advocating before governmental bodies and officials.” How interesting that Assembly Bill 563, authored by Speaker Vos, was introduced only one day before its hearing. I would say it's pretty difficult to effectively advocate before a governmental body with barely 24 hours' notice, so the bill is already hypocritical in its provisions. But it doesn't stop there. The bill also attempts to regulate civics curriculum to require teaching “an understanding of pupils' shared rights and responsibilities as residents of this state.” Sounds great, doesn't it? Except that Speaker Vos and the exclusively Republican co-sponsorship of this bill seem to have forgotten their own rights and

responsibilities as residents in, not to mention representatives of, this state. They are responsible, as stewards of their constituents, for engaging with experts and stakeholders in Wisconsin as they craft legislation. In this field, civics education, I am both an expert and a stakeholder, and more importantly, the duly elected Wisconsin state superintendent. This is an independent statewide elected office. I head the Department of Public Instruction, charged with advancing public education to ensure the success of our state's children, and somehow the sponsors of this bill forgot to consult us or other experts or stakeholders. I wonder why.

Actually, I know why. They don't want to hear what I have to say. The thing is, they shouldn't have a choice. They don't have to agree with me, but concerning public education in Wisconsin, I will not stand idly by while legislative leaders attempt a blatant power grab at the expense of Wisconsin's children. We must – and we will – make our case.

Another of these hastily proposed and ill-advised bills is Assembly Bill 562, which would require parental notification prior to any instruction regarding sexuality or gender identity, effectively obstructing the potential for free and open discussion in our classrooms and LGBTQ+- inclusive curriculum in our schools. There are far-reaching and damaging implications of this bill, but again, with one day's notice, we cannot thoroughly examine them. I wonder why. My guess is that speed is tantamount to smoke and mirrors; the sponsors of this bill want to hide exactly how far-reaching and damaging this legislation stands to be. Let me be clear: it would be extremely damaging. This bill, if made into law, would hurt children, both LGBTQ+ and not. Without being able to address sexuality and gender identity in the classroom, how can LGBTQ+ students identify the supportive staff in their schools? Research from GLSEN shows that having supportive adults in a school has a significant positive effect on LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging and safety, not to mention on their attendance rates and their academic success.¹ And all students benefit from supportive adults and LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, because modeling support and allyship reduces discrimination, and inclusive curriculum makes it possible to teach about the rich tapestry of the people of Wisconsin, of which the LGBTQ+ community is an integral part. So here is my message for the students of Wisconsin: you have an ally in your state superintendent. I've got your back.

That is why I am taking my appeal directly to the people of Wisconsin, who elected me to lead public education in this state. You can agree or disagree with me, but either way, I need you to pay attention. I need you to read up on these bills. I need you to talk to your schools and your friends, and especially your children, about what they would mean for the schools and classrooms in your district. And I need you to call your

state representative and senator and ask them to slow down. I have problems with these bills, and I also have a problem with the way they are being rammed through the process. Each one of these bills should take months of study with experts and engagement with stakeholders. Educators should be interviewed, and school administrators consulted. We should ask the students what they think. None of this is happening, and it cannot happen unless we push the pause button on the process and give Wisconsinites enough time to make our voices heard.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights." Now that the Wisconsin public is more informed, we have noticed that things have gone far wrong, and it is time to set our government to rights and get our legislative leaders to take on the real challenges, not the fabricated ones created for political sport.

I learned that in civics class.

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¹For more information on the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, please see <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>.

NOTE: A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly is available at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/news/Jill_Underly.jpg. This guest editorial is available electronically at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2021/do-not-let-legislative-leadership-undermine-public-education>.