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An open letter to families and educators

From Wisconsin State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

Dear Wisconsin Families and Educators,

I am writing this letter to you as a fellow parent and a former teacher.

Like you, I know what it means to be involved with my children's education, and I love it. But I look at the way politicians talk about parental involvement, and I don't recognize it. Family engagement isn't about yelling at school staff or suing your school board if they don't do exactly as you demand. It's also not asking caregivers to homeschool or pay for private tuition if they feel unheard or unseen. Family engagement is about having a real conversation about – and with – our children. Like you, I build relationships with my children's teachers, I reach out when I need to, and they know they can call if they need to. As a parent, I love my children's school, and I see the ways our district works to involve all families and the entire community, and how the entire community supports our school. It's an exchange, because what matters most to all of us is what we all have in common: our children.

Of course, this isn't what politicians mean when they talk about protecting parental rights when it comes to children's education. Rather, they're talking about micromanaging curriculum and preying on our parental emotions during a traumatic time, all with the ulterior motive of placing suspicion on educators by weaponizing lessons about difficult topics, or by placing blame on schools for a pandemic they did not cause but are nonetheless supporting our children through.

As to my fellow educators, you and I all know that this isn't the first time that politicians in this state have gone after teachers. And as a former civics teacher, I know that teaching the history of this nation cannot – and should not – be done without tackling difficult topics. Families know this and support these opportunities for our schools to engage our children to become critical thinkers and critical consumers of information. We want our students to grow up and be active participants in democracy, and that means they

(more)

need to know how to examine their past, think critically about their present, and make informed decisions about their future. This critical lens is what makes our democracy stronger, and the only way for our children to engage is through our public schools where this freedom to think critically is encouraged and the skill of thinking critically is actively taught. Teaching is our expertise, and we are happy to learn from parents about your children, just as we hope families are excited to learn the answer to, “What did you do in school today, honey?” when your learner walks through the door.

I’m tired. Like you, I’m tired of the pandemic. I’m getting tired of this winter. And I’m really, really tired of politicians pitting parents against teachers when our children are the ones who get hurt in the end. Because they’re the ones who matter most in this conversation and who matter most for the future of our state. And that conversation – how to best meet the needs of our children and students – is one I’m excited to continue having as a parent and an educator, and to lead as your Wisconsin State Superintendent.

Sincerely,

Jill

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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/2022/jill-underly-open-letter-families-educators>.