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## Let's allow our children to be their whole selves

*An editorial by Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Assistant State Superintendent Duy Nguyen*

I am a Vietnamese American educator, and I want you to know that every day, you are empowered to be fascinated by the prior experiences and knowledge that all of our students, educators, and families bring to us. Sharing stories provides space for us to connect with one another and helps build authentic relationships.

In any profession (and especially in education), it is important that we think through our “why” — the reason we do the work we do — and that we share our story with each other. By doing so, we strengthen our understanding of each other’s perspectives and the experiences and strengths each of us bring to the table. My personal story and experiences growing up helped shape me and the work I do for Wisconsin students.

My family left Vietnam as refugees in the 1980s because we did not believe in the political construct that ultimately took over. It took us four attempts to flee Vietnam to finally be united as a full family of 11 in America.

As all our educators want to do right by each of our students, our schools and districts are continuing to dig deeper into understanding and supporting different marginalized subgroups. Growing up, I fell into many of these: low socio-economic status, language learner, and Asian.

In elementary school, I learned early on that my family struggled with access to food. I still remember being handed the bright orange lunch tickets to let our food service staff know I needed to be accounted differently for lunch. The awareness at 5 years old that my family and I were not worthy of food, that I had to be treated differently, is steeped in my identity.

At the same time in elementary school, it was decided that I was unable to speak English proficiently. Because of that, I was sent to a separate classroom and was tasked with playing a computer game to help me learn. Instead of using my knowledge to think critically like other students in my class, I was isolated and spent some of my days deciding if I wanted to eat the virtual fish, ignore the bait, or escape from predators. As one of the only Vietnamese students in school, it was clear to me that I was different, and for

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me to fit in, I had to act and be someone else. In this case, I assimilated to a point where I was embarrassed of who I really was and where I came from.

Years later, I look back and have so many questions.

What if I had educators who acknowledged my prior experiences and background and saw them as my strengths to then build upon?

What if we develop the capacity for compassion...to see the good in each other? To notice the fact that having food is a basic need for all children. To see that our children do not come to us broken. They are whole. They come to us with prior experiences and knowledge to be valued and acknowledged.

What if my educators recognized that my understanding of language was higher than my ability to speak? What if I had the chance to be with my peers, in the classroom, to feel connected, to be visible, and to know that my story was worthy of inclusion?

What if I could be my whole self? Not ashamed of my genesis story; instead, proud knowing that it is the counter story that supports the work of wanting all humans to flourish.

It wasn't until I had the opportunity to be with people who believed in me, people who were fascinated by me, that I could start to put my compelling "why" I am in education into words. As an assistant state superintendent at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, I want to give every child a voice, so they do not end up being adults without one, or who don't recognize their own. I encourage all of us to know our own stories and find ways to engage in storytelling and "story LISTENING."

As an American educator and Wisconsin's first Southeast Asian assistant state superintendent, please join me in lifting our students' lived experiences, so we can start to appreciate and allow them to be their whole selves. This will go a long way toward becoming the lifelong learners that we need to be.

Our amazing educators have a deep respect for our students. Let's lean into our curiosity and fascination with others by taking the time to slow down and truly know who is in our school communities. I firmly believe that hearing their stories and learning from one another will help every student flourish; in turn, our educators will continue to thrive and be inspired to persist in the incredible work they do.

*"As the elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction, part of my job is to select other leaders to form my Cabinet. I am honored to work with this group of visionary educators every single day, and I am always impressed by their insight, their dedication, and the unique and needed perspectives they*

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*bring to our decisions. I think more of Wisconsin needs to hear directly from them. To that end, you're going to see these leaders write editorials, represent the agency in public, and take a more active role leading our schools and communities. Today, we published the first of a series of editorials, this one by Assistant State Superintendent Duy Nguyen in honor of American Education Week. I invite you to learn from his story and his vision, and I am excited for you to learn more about and from these education leaders going forward."* – State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

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**NOTE:** A headshot for publication of Assistant State Superintendent Duy Nguyen is available upon request. This guest editorial is available online [on the Wisconsin DPI's website](#).