

It's time to stand with Florence

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For the past few years, many legislators turned their backs on public-school advocates who complained about funding problems. “You’re in okay shape,” the legislators said. “Come back when you have a real disaster, like a district going belly-up.”

Well, we’re back, honorable legislators. Florence County School District has formally petitioned the state to let it close its doors. It’s broke and the school board has determined that it can no longer provide an adequate education for the district’s 644 children.

Is Florence a sign of bad times ahead for more school districts? That’s a no-brainer, like wondering if the London bombings are a sign there may be more terrorism ahead. Commentators across the state refer to Florence as a bellwether for other districts and some predict a “domino effect” among similar rural districts in the northern lake country area.

The good news is that the Florence disaster has boosted the number of people who understand that comprehensive school-finance reform is urgently needed.

What’s fundamentally amiss in the current system is the absence of any linkage between our expectations of public schools and the budgets we give them.

Today’s educational expectations are based on a new generation of students, new tough federal standards laid out in the No Child Left Behind Act, new state standards, new technologies, an historic wave of immigration, and even to a large degree a new economy.

Wisconsin’s revenue-limit system, however, means that schools are essentially told to work with whatever amount of money they happened to spend in 1993. There are supposed to be annual increases for inflation and enrollment changes, but the inflation adjustments are grossly under funded and the enrollment adjustments continue to punish the hundreds of districts with declining student counts.

Each year, the increases allowed by revenue limits are less than schools’ “cost-to-continue,” the amount needed just to maintain programming from one year to the next. The result: Schools are forced to cut more staff and more programs.

There’s nothing wrong with the rigorous new standards for education. But the simple fact is that we have high expectations for schools without budgets to match.

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There's a fundamental hypocrisy at work—a contradiction between what we expect schools to accomplish, on the one hand, and the tools we give them, on the other. You can't expect classes of 40 or more students to produce nothing but creative, productive, responsible citizens, but that's what we expect from too many school districts.

Linking budgets to expectations is the cornerstone of the school-finance movement known nationally as “adequacy.” Adequacy says we should determine how much our expectations would cost, and use that information to guide school budgets. Groups I work with, such as the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, have been fighting for “adequacy” for years and have well-developed ideas for how to make it happen in Wisconsin (see www.excellentschools.org).

If you want to pay less, fine. Just understand that means settling for lower expectations. Higher standards and higher budgets, or lower budgets and lesser standards—that's the tradeoff Wisconsin should be debating.

What we're stuck with now, however, is a false debate. Too many politicians brag about supporting both high expectations and low taxes, as if the two could be magically combined.

When Florence opted to close its schools, it made a tough but intellectually honest decision to defend high standards and reject the myth that we can get quality schools on inferior budgets.

“I am proud to be the president of the school board that has drawn the line for education,” said Florence School Board President Dan Brereton.

It's time we all stand on Florence's side of the line.

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