

Chris Larson: Starting school

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Like many other anxious parents across Wisconsin, next week will be my daughter's first day as a public school student. With this looming milestone comes a lot of gut-wrenching anxiety, both as a parent and as a lawmaker. Like it or not, every parent is staring down the harsh reality of a new school year and what it means for their family. I can't help but think how her academic experience will be impacted by the Lost Walker Decade of cuts to schools, the vilifying of our public school teachers, and the prioritizing unaccountable private voucher schools over schools that serve everyone.

The values deficit is the \$1 billion that has been cut from our neighborhood public schools over the last eight years of which \$183 million still remains unrestored. As long as we have these unrestored cuts to public education, Governor Walker cannot claim any kind of budget surplus and our children who rely on a strong neighborhood school will pay the price. This deficit represents smaller class sizes for more focused education, special education programs that kids desperately need, and an increased burden on local tax-base when they are called on to fill the gaps.

In Wisconsin, we now have a Dickensian system where year after year school districts are forced to go hat-in-hand to taxpayers and beg for more funding through ballot referendums. Like Oliver Twist, our school districts' bowls are empty and they are repeatedly left asking, "more please." It is unfair for Wisconsin communities to be forced in a situation, by Republicans, where they are left wondering if they can count on funding for their school districts. In the Milwaukee area this fall, 10 school districts are asking taxpayers for a combined \$429 million through ballot referendums. That's on top of the 510 school funding referendums passed since Walker's cuts to education, representing nearly 5.5 billion dollars. Asking locals, teachers, and others to pick up Walker's slack is not a sustainable solution for education funding and more and more parents are taking notice.

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At the same time, we have asked our public school teachers to give more and more of themselves while compensating them with less and less. Teacher wages are largely stagnant. Even still, public school teachers spend \$500 out of their own pockets on supplies for their classrooms each year. Is it any wonder Wisconsin has a shortage of teachers? It has gotten so bad that the GOP controlled legislature has had to lower the bar for teachers' licensure just to fill positions. Instead, we should be fully restoring cuts to our children's education and restoring a sense of dignity to our valued educators.

Access to a quality education should not just be for those who can afford it. While over \$1 billion has been cut from public schools over the last eight years, Wisconsin taxpayers have spent \$1.31 billion in private voucher school funding. This is not a funding gap, this is a values deficit. The fact is, 75% of students who are using the new statewide private school voucher program were already enrolled in a private school the previous school year. Taxpayers should not subsidize private schools while we continue to starve our local, open public schools. A strong public school is the foundation for many neighborhoods and they deserve to have the peace of mind of secure and sustained funding.

So, as I prepare to send my daughter to school for her first year of public school, it is with a keen sense that much more could be done to support her school and teachers. With a realignment of our priorities, we can restore funding back to pre-Walker levels. We can fix the teacher shortage by restoring the dignity that should come naturally to those who dedicate their lives to guiding our kids through how the world works. We can and should finally fix the values deficit that has built up between the public school system and the unaccountable private voucher system.

Each and every one of our kids deserve a school and a state that values them.

- Larson, D-Milwaukee, represents the 7th Senate District.