

Thompson says GOP lawmaker 'making a big mistake' in seeking to sue UW System over COVID-19 policy oversight

Posted on Friday, Aug 27, 2021

UW System interim President Tommy Thompson says a key Republican lawmaker is "making a big mistake" in seeking legal action against universities.

JCRAR co-chair Sen. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, said earlier this week he'll ask legislative leadership to sue the System shortly after the former GOP gov decided not to submit pandemic-related policies as rules to the committee. Thompson expressed confidence Thursday that Wisconsin statutes and administrative rules empower the System to handle campus buildings and safety.

"My friend Steve Nass can make that decision," Thompson said during a virtual WisPolitics.com luncheon Thursday. "I think they're making a big mistake. I think they're going to lose the battle."

Despite his disagreement with the JCRAR, Thompson said he is not in a fight with the Republican-led Legislature and denied that the Republican Party is divided into two sections.

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"I don't agree on the administrative rules. Does that make me less of a Republican? No," Thompson said. "Does that make Steve Nass less of a Republican because he believes in them? No."

Nass aide Mike Mikalsen shot back Thompson and UW officials are mistaken in their reading of administrative codes. One gives the UW the power to ban people from

campus buildings if “his or her presence or behavior interferes with this purpose or with the university’s administrative operations, is in violation of a university policy, rule, regulation or any other provision of this chapter, or is without the consent of an authorized university official or faculty member.”

Mikalsen argued that doesn’t give the system the power to bar students from buildings for not wearing masks or refusing to get a regular COVID test.

“The interim president of the university system doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Mikalsen said.

One of the Legislature’s top Republicans Thursday raised doubts about the wisdom of suing the System.

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, on Thursday tweeted “a lawsuit from the legislature would only add more confusion during an already stressful time” as students return to in-person classes for the first time in months.

“We’ll continue to monitor the decisions made by System, and stand ready to respond if future actions warrant it,” Steineke added.

The Joint Committee on Legislative Organization is often the body that approves legal action by the Legislative. It’s controlled 6-4 by GOP lawmakers, and Steineke serves on the committee.

But the Senate also has the power to authorize a lawsuit on its own. A spokesman for Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, said the caucus would meet on the issue before making a final decision on a path forward.

Mikalsen ripped Steineke for his comments, saying the GOP leader appears unfazed by the prospect of maskless students being arrested for trying to enter a campus building or “forcing a stick up the nose” of every unvaccinated student for regular COVID tests even if they’re not showing symptoms.

“He says he’s for individual freedom, but then only says if they want to stick a needle in someone’s arm that he’ll draw that line,” Mikalsen said, referring to vaccine mandates that many Republicans oppose.

See the UW administrative codes under Chapter 18 [here](#).

Thompson repeated the System will not mandate vaccinations, but encouraged the Biden administration to “resell” the Pfizer vaccine after it received full authorization from the FDA amid delta variant outbreaks.

“They’ve got to be out every single day publicizing the need to get vaccinated,” said the former national health secretary. “It’s important for people to understand this is a safe vaccine.”

Thompson also said he will visit campuses to advertise the System’s vaccine incentive program. Vaccinated UW System students can win one of 70 scholarships valued at \$7,000 each if their university reaches a 70 percent COVID-19 vaccination threshold by Oct. 15. UW-Madison students are not included in the incentive program.

Thompson said he is 100 percent confident about holding 75 percent of classes in-person this fall across all System universities, which will mandate masks on their campuses for 30 days. The decision to impose temporary mask mandates was based on faculty concern about the Delta variant and consultations with county health departments, Thompson said.

“In order for the faculty to teach, the students to have in-person classes, masking is a small price to pay in order for everyone to be safe,” Thompson said.

Thompson added that he does not expect any increases in tuition in the near future despite decreases in returning enrollment, but called for a bipartisan blue-ribbon statewide task force on higher education.

He speculated fewer students are returning for their sophomore and junior years due to pandemic-driven hardships, the appeal of leaving school for a job with an income and a nationwide normalization of skipping college. Gov. Tony Evers and the Legislature should create a task force to investigate these and other issues, such as how to more efficiently use state-funded tech college and UW System school buildings and programs, Thompson said.

Some of the UW System’s 15 campuses are in the same towns as tech colleges. Thompson said some even share parking lots but remain separate. He said a task force could help universities and tech schools combine their efforts to repair campus buildings and avoid duplicate efforts.

“Higher education is changing,” Thompson said. “We’re not measuring up.”

One of Thompson’s goals during his last six months as president is to create an extended campus with correspondence courses to compete against university systems from other states.

“We need to be able to have distance learning,” Thompson said. “And it has to come now or else we’re going to get so far behind, we’ll never get back in the ballgame.”

Thompson said he doesn’t have updates on the search for a new UW System president but wants the new leader to be unafraid to stand up against forces like the Legislature and university chancellors.

“Bring somebody in who is willing to stand up and make tough decisions,” Thompson said. “This university needs a president that’s not afraid.”

Thompson added that he doesn’t think the Board of Regents search committee will choose to keep him as president, but has additional plans for his final six months in the position. He said he is transforming the financial and human resources systems at the University of Wisconsin, noting that its current computer systems are “archaic” and “obsolete.”

“It’s the biggest transformation of the university system,” Thompson said. “And then we will be able to run this university in a modern way.”

Thompson also said he will continue to push for building projects on the state’s campuses.

Watch the video:

<https://youtu.be/zHWf6v7zLpc>