

State superintendent candidates clash over vouchers, leadership on 'UpFront'

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In a weekend TV appearance, the candidates for state schools superintendent clashed over voucher schools and their own district leadership during the pandemic.

Deborah Kerr, former superintendent of the Brown Deer Schools, and Jill Underly, superintendent of the Pecatonica Area Schools, appeared jointly on the statewide "UpFront" program, produced in partnership with WisPolitics.com.

After a question about how to open schools during the pandemic, Underly knocked Kerr for implying that she has led a district through the pandemic. Kerr resigned from Brown Deer Schools in the summer of 2020, several months after the pandemic started.

"I'm the only candidate who is running a school district through this pandemic, and I know what it takes to get our schools open," Underly said, adding she has worked with her district board and parents to keep the Pecatonica schools open. She said schools in her rural district are able to provide social distancing for students.

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Kerr pointed out she had to shut down the Brown Deer district in March 2020 when COVID-19 cases started to explode and Gov. Tony Evers issued a stay-home order.

"We need to open the schools now. Period. We need to trust our parents. We need to treat them like adults. They want to have information and a voice, and we want to partner together with them to open our schools," Kerr said. She claimed she is the "only candidate with a plan to do this."

The candidates also clashed over a question of whether private voucher schools should receive public money.

“There’s massive special interests connected to Betsy DeVos and Scott Walker and Donald Trump that want to take every penny of public funding that they can for private schools, and they don’t care about the kids they are leaving behind. So I’m going to make sure we fight for every kid and not just the kids in the unaccountable voucher system,” Underly said.

“I am pro-kid. I do not support taking away a parent’s right to choose where their kid goes to school,” Kerr said. “The state superintendent cannot change these laws. So look at the Legislature. Does anyone really think the current Legislature is going to massively roll back these policies? No. But I’m going to continue to be an advocate and equity champion for all kids.”

Kerr also apologized for a tweet she sent and later deleted that critics called racially insensitive. On Twitter, Kerr — who is white — said she had been called the n-word as a teenager because her lips were big.

“I’m very sorry for making that comment on Twitter,” Kerr said. “Real leadership means owning your mistakes and moving forward.”

Kerr said she would “move forward” by creating an office of diversity and inclusion if elected, so that “all Black and brown students can have a voice and a place at the table.”

See more from the program:
<http://www.wisn.com/upfront>