Superintendent candidates aim to retain computer science teachers but strategies differ

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The state's two school superintendent candidates say attracting and retaining skilled computer science teachers are key to improving student tech literacy.

However, they disagreed in a pair of webcast conversations on how to best retain those newly skilled teachers and students.

Pecatonica School District Superintendent Jill Underly and former Brown Deer School District Superintendent Deborah Kerr participated in a virtual discussion on computer science education in Wisconsin ahead of the February primary. The series was in partnership with WisPolitics.com, WisBusiness.com and the Milwaukee Tech Hub Coalition.

The duo, to face off in the April 6 election, agreed that increasing the number of teachers with computer science skills in schools will help improve computer technology literacy among students and help those students get jobs.

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Underly said a combination of creating more attractive benefits for skilled teachers and computer technology course requirements for new teachers would help improve the situation.

Since many college graduates with computer science skills have better job opportunities in the private sector, Underly said DPI should create more recommendations to help make computer science teaching jobs more attractive, especially after Act 10 stripped teacher unions of collective bargaining rights.

Underly also said schools could help provide a better learning environment and promote better broad-based computer literacy if teachers had more experience with newer technologies such as those used in virtual learning. She recommended adding computer science classes as a requirement for education majors to help, but she added those teachers with more qualifications deserve more compensation.

"These are really high-end skills, and the expectation needs to be that: If we want individuals to have these skills, we have to pay them for that knowledge and that expertise," Underly said. "Education has changed so much and we can't continue to devalue, I think, the work that teachers have and the education that they bring."

But Kerr said schools and businesses need to work together to give students the education they need to fill available job positions.

"In order to grow tech talent and really drive economic success, we have to have foundational standards that will teach our kids the knowledge and skills and dispositions they need to be successful in a global economy," Kerr said.

She also wants to help professionals overcome barriers to get teaching licenses so schools can build their own computer science programs tailored to suit the needs of businesses.

And she said working with professional groups and businesses that need workers who are skilled in computer science will help build the pipeline that would provide a workforce for those businesses while ensuring students have the skills they need to get jobs as soon as possible.

Watch the webcasts:
https://www.wisbusiness.com/category/state-superintendent-webcasts/

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