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Tressa Pankovits: On Wisconsin: Democrats listening to parents advance equal school funding

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Students may not realize it, but when they head back to school next week, public education will be funded at the highest level in Wisconsin history. It's important to recognize a handful of Democrats, all from blue, blue Milwaukee, who courageously cast a hard vote this legislative session. As a result, Wisconsin will also provide more equal state funding for non-traditional K-12 schools.

Despite pressure from teachers unions, five Democrats supported increasing public charter school funding. The bill, Act 11, was an unexpected, complicated, bipartisan compromise that Democratic Governor Tony Evers hammered out with Wisconsin's Republican legislative majority in order to pass the state budget. The charter school funding provision represents a concession for Evers, whose record on charter schools is lukewarm and, at times, antagonistic.

In addition to providing a historic level of K-12 education funding across the state's education sectors, Wisconsin's new two-year budget will eventually bring state spending on Milwaukee's public charter school students to within 90% of what it spends on district school students. Specifically, public charter schools will get an extra $2,121 per child, increasing per pupil funding to $11,385.

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Charter schools are free public schools that are open to all students. They operate pursuant to performance contracts (or "charters") that authorize them to use public

funding. These contracts hold them accountable to taxpayers, parents, and students alike.

There's an old saw about 1930s movie star Ginger Rogers executing the same ballroom dances as Fred Astaire, only backwards and in high heels. In Wisconsin, public charter schools had to meet the same state standards as traditional schools — or higher, if that's how their contract was drafted — with as little as 65% of the state per pupil funding that traditional district schools get.

Unfortunately, Wisconsin is not unique. Many state legislatures discriminate against charter schools when passing state budgets.

That's clearly unfair to public charter school students, the majority of whom are children of color and/or low-income. In Democratic strongholds, however, many legislators are beholden to teachers unions that donate to their campaigns. The unions demonize public charter schools because most are not unionized. To teachers unions, public charter school teachers represent the loss of dues-paying members. The unions consider it fair game to pressure lawmakers to set charters up to fail, consequences for students be damned.

That's why you'll find an explosion of high-quality charter school growth in red, right-to-work-states like Texas and Florida, but all kinds of arbitrary burdens piled on them in blue states and cities where teachers unions have enormous sway. Which brings us back to Wisconsin, where State Senators LaTonya Johnson, Lena Taylor, Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, and State Representatives Kalan Haywood and Dora E. Drake stepped up for more equal funding for public schools. All these Democrats represent "blue" Milwaukee districts. All voted to ensure the low-income, minority children they represent have close to the same learning resources as their wealthier suburban counterparts.

Their votes were not enthusiastic in every case. Leading them to find common ground with Milwaukee's charter school communities was a long, hard slog for school choice advocates. The nonprofit City Forward Collective (CFC) helped knit together a grassroots network of more than 1,000 parents and school leaders tired of the inequity, along with others committed to improving educational opportunities for marginalized children. CFC educated parents about the funding gap, its impact on school budgets, the state budget process, and how to advocate for a bill. Parents strategically engaged with state lawmakers — just as teachers unions do when their agendas are threatened. Only, instead of buckets of campaign cash, parents

brought their voices and stories of how public charter schools are improving their children's life prospects.

The campaign worked. In fact, it's a model for community organizing best practices. It's also a sign that smart Democrats are beginning, in the wake of the education upheaval wrought by the pandemic, to demonstrate that they *can* read a room. In a May 2023 poll, the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce association found that 70% of Wisconsinites support school choice – Republicans, Independents, and Democrats across the board. Nationally, 82% of parents view charter schools favorably. Support is especially strong amongst Black and Latino parents, the very demographic CFC successfully mobilized to change legislators' hearts and minds.

One example, when CFC first asked Senator Johnson to support closing the charter school funding gap, she answered with a straight up "no." But after months of hearing from her voters, she became passionate in a Senate hearing explaining her switch to voting "yes" on narrowing the funding gap.

"I'm not about to make our children winners or losers," she declared. "Because if children are coming from my district, and they are coming from communities where their access to public education is failing, they've already lost."

Wisconsin isn't the only place where some Democrats, however reluctantly, are beginning to reconcile with parents' demands for more charter school funding and seats. For example, staunchly pro-union, anti-public charter school Governor Phil Murphy finally acquiesced to parents' demand that some popular New Jersey public charters be allowed to expand their enrollment numbers.

In Connecticut, the night before the Senate Education Committee was set to vote on a bill that would make it easier for new charter schools to open, Connecticut's teachers unions emailed Democrats warning them that their votes would be published in the Connecticut Education Association's "legislative scorecard." Despite the threat, 15 Democrats voted in favor of the bill. One even gave a 31-minute speech that was likely the most rousing defense of public charter schools ever heard in that state's capitol.

In these places and others where Democrats have taken baby steps back to their roots of championing public charter schools, the sky hasn't fallen. After all, the teachers unions have nowhere else to go.

But parents do.

Republicans are again making school choice one of their primary issues leading up to the 2024 election cycle. In four key 2024 battleground states — Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina — 64% of Democrats support charter schools. Democrats should listen carefully to parents before voters go to the polls.

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