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Every day in Wisconsin, hundreds of thousands of students are welcomed to their neighborhood public schools by qualified educators. Amazing things happen there, with doors of opportunity opened wide for students of all abilities and backgrounds. We all can agree that safe, caring schools are essential for learning to take place. Sometimes, however, students and staff face threats and violence that get in the way of learning.

Public schools are microcosms of our society, and it's up to all of us – working together – to make sure students and educators can focus on the important task at hand. How do we make sure students and staff are physically and emotionally safe so that learning can happen?

One idea introduced by the Wisconsin Legislature, Assembly Bill 693, claims to put control of safety in the hands of teachers, but upon closer look it misses the mark entirely. Parent and educator groups are strongly cautioning against enacting it into law – for the sake of students.

As a teacher, I agree that professional educators at the school level should have the greatest voice in creating a safe school environment. School-based educators, supported by sound policy, an engaged community and supportive administration, have the skills and experience to work with students and their families to create a welcoming and restorative school climate. Educators are constantly learning and adapting their practice to support the students that they serve and are committed to working with their students, families and communities to create schools that not only educate students academically, but that also prepare them to be active citizens.

The latest proposal does not effectively support our school communities in their efforts to educate students academically and socially. It doesn't build on efforts to engage in a meaningful dialog around disparities in discipline and work collectively to engage in restorative practices that address the root causes of student disruption and violence. Instead, this bill aims to restore a system that has failed to protect staff and students and in some cases, has served to increase tensions in an already challenging climate.

This bill focuses on disciplinary practices while failing to provide for training and supports that could de-escalate incidents. It fails to adequately account for students with special education needs. It also has the potential to increase divisions between staff members and also between schools and their communities. Educators need support in their efforts to help students and families chart a course that moves all students towards paths that build a positive future, not additional layers of legislation that don't address underlying issues that lead to violence.

There are other ways to protect teachers while at the same time making our schools safer. There are already statutes that allow for educators to impact discipline. Additional resources can be allocated for ongoing professional development for all staff. Additional resources can

also be used for support staff (nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists). We need to support our students and provide wrap-around services to address additional needs that go beyond what schools can provide. Staff members who are victims of violence need additional supports emotionally and financially.

In fact, the latest proposed legislation is a direct result of silencing of the educators in public schools. Educators have seen their ability to influence policy and engage in meaningful dialog around critical educational topics decline since 2011. During this same time, the level of violence experienced by staff has increased.

If we truly want to protect teachers, we need to recapture the collective spirit that inspired Wisconsin's public school tradition and engage in a dialog that unites us in a common purpose. True teacher protection involves reestablishing educator voice through collective bargaining and in other ways so those who work closest to students every day have a say in how to keep schools safe and caring places for students to learn.

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