Statement to the Assembly Committee on State Affairs

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Opposition to AB 670, relating to increasing the minimum retirement age for some public employees and not others, and other changes to WRS

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My name is Peggy Wirtz-Olsen. I am a teacher from Marshfield, currently serving as Vice President of the Wisconsin Education Association Council. WEAC represents teachers and other public school employees in every part of Wisconsin.

As I am sure you are aware, the teaching workforce is primarily female. Other professions in the state, including police and firefighters, remain predominately male workforces. In Wisconsin, the male-dominated public employees tend to fall into what are known as “protective” groupings like police and firefighting.

The authors of AB 670 chose to raise the minimum retirement age for “non-protective” public employees, including teachers and other public employees, from the current age of 55 to 59.5. The bill’s authors chose not to change the minimum retirement age for protective employees, which is currently age 50.

Singling out teachers while leaving male-dominated professions alone smacks of injustice. In solidarity, the protective classes have consistently stood shoulder to shoulder with educators and spoken out against divide-and-conquer policies. We stand together because we have a common vision to improve our communities through our hard work and unique contributions.

One of the stated goals of this legislation is making it easier to hire retired teachers, as a solution to teachers who are leaving the profession in alarming numbers. Carving out educators as a workforce and shouldering them with additional barriers because they chose to teach children will not attract and keep qualified teachers in our classrooms. Teachers just entering the profession say it’s one more sign that our state doesn’t value them. It’s one more reason to rethink teaching in Wisconsin.

What will attract the best and brightest into the teaching profession and retain those who are already working in our schools? Treat us like professionals. Make us feel appreciated. Give us a seat at the table. And pay us in a manner that is worthy of our positions and our training.

Making it easier to hire retired educators can certainly be part of the equation, and there are ways to accomplish that without raising the retirement age. But hear this. Hiring retired teachers is not a long-term solution. It is only one small part of the solution and it needs to be done in a way that respects and rewards our state’s hard-working teachers. It needs to be fair.

Thank you for listening to the concerns of tens of thousands of teachers through WEAC. We look forward to continuing to work with you to support and strengthen our state’s public schools.