

How a State Law Obstructed Reward for Teen's Hard Work and Good Grades

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Senator Vinehout writes about the Academic Excellence Higher Education Scholarship. This scholarship is awarded to the valedictorian of each high school in Wisconsin. But, for high schools with total pupil count below 80, the valedictorians are thrown into a pool from which only 10 scholarships are awarded. Since 90 high schools fall into this category, a small school valedictorian may qualify one year and not the next. The law discriminates against small high schools that are often in rural areas.

ALMA - Joel knew from the 8th grade he wanted to be valedictorian of his high school class. His cousin just graduated at the top of his class. Because of this achievement, the cousin received a scholarship.

Joel (not his real name) talked to his cousin and learned more about the scholarship. I'm going to uphold the family tradition, Joel told himself. I'm going to win this scholarship.

The Academic Excellence Higher Education Scholarship is Wisconsin's way of saying, "Well done" to a graduating valedictorian. The scholarship amounts to \$2,250 a year to be used for tuition at a Wisconsin college or university. Depending on the total number of students enrolled in a high school, additional scholarships may be awarded to the top graduating seniors.

Joel got to work. He took every class seriously- even physical education and cooking. He studied hard and got nearly perfect grades. He was nominated to the National Honor Society since his sophomore year.

Joel competed against other students who might have been smarter, might have had better test scores and might have had some other advantage. But Joel worked harder. And not just in the classroom.

He was on Student Council for three years and now serves as an officer. He played in Jazz Band all four years of high school. He was nominated for and played in three regional honors bands. He took his alto saxophone to state solo ensemble competition for two years and hopes to compete at state again this spring.

Although Joel is not particularly outgoing, he polished his public speaking skills through forensics; making it to state competition all three years of high school. He hopes to again make it to the state forensics tournament this spring.

Joel's talents and hard work continued in his community service. He volunteers at church. He loves Scouts and served as Senior Patrol Leader for two years. He cleans up a local park as part of his Eagle Scout community service project. Joel showed livestock, did wood-working and served two years as president of his 4H club. He helped at the county fair Lions Club food booth when he wasn't keeping his 4H hogs well-behaved and clean.

If that isn't enough Joel, who also served as FFA president for three years, helps his dad around the farm. He took tractor safety and hunter safety and worked on the summer maintenance crew in his hometown.

Joel's already taken three college courses – which he aced – spent three years on the golf team and played a leading role in the school play – three years in a row.

To say Joel is well-deserving is an understatement.

So Joel – recently named valedictorian of his graduating class - and his parents were surprised to be informed the scholarship he so deserved was not forthcoming.

Last year's senior class valedictorian was awarded the scholarship, and valedictorians going back several years, and maybe again next year, but not this year. Why?

Because the number of students in Joel's high school dipped below 80 this year.

After hearing this story, I took a look at the law.

High schools with a total pupil count below 80 are not automatically awarded a scholarship. Instead the names of valedictorians from these high schools are put into a pool from which only ten scholarships are awarded. This year about 90 small schools fall into this category. Many of these schools are charter or private schools. But as enrollment drops in rural areas whole public school districts are being caught up in the 80-student rule – at least five more this year.

The superintendent of a local high school at 81 students wrote to me: a student should not be penalized for the size of the high school they attend. The current law would seem to be discriminatory to students who live in rural Wisconsin.

Seems to be? The superintendent was too kind. The law is discriminatory – and needs to be changed. I call on my colleagues to reward the hard work of all Wisconsin valedictorians – regardless of where they live.

Let's change this law! And let's get it done right now.

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