

School Play Mirrors Confusion in Assembly Education Committee

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The Wisconsin Assembly's Education Committee is considering of a bill that would convert local public schools to private 'independent charter' schools all in the name of "accountability". □ There is little evidence that such a move produces superior results, but investment does as we learn from countries with high performing schools.

MADISON - "Edgar: All right, everybody; back to the scene of the crime.

"Ella: New clues?

"Carol: What clues?

"Bob: What's the next clue?

"Carol: I don't have a clue.

"Norman: (At the window box, dramatically.) Guys, the body's gone!"

So goes the hilarious comedy written by Craig Sodaro and performed by Alma students. The play begins as a murder mystery dinner invitation and ends wrapped up in an international smuggling ring.

Students spent the last three and a half months practicing lines and preparing costumes. Play Director Tom Brakke coordinated a cast of roughly a quarter of Alma's Middle and High Schoolers with precious few resources. He even directed students to buy up half-priced dresses and police uniforms at After-Halloween-Sales.

The work shows. The fast-paced comedy pulled in record crowds at the rural high school. Teens of all ages delivered their lines flawlessly and kept everyone entertained.

I took in the show on a brief break. I couldn't help but see parallels between the confusion of the dinner guests and the lines delivered at a recent Assembly Education Committee hearing.

While the students were putting final touches on the performance, the Assembly Education Committee was considering how to turn local public schools into 'independent charter' schools.

In what was described as the "worst run hearing in Capitol history", the author of the bill began by saying he was changing it but he didn't know exactly how. The bill's main component – an unelected, unaccountable, politically appointed board – would not be in the final version.

Nevertheless, the chair was committed to quickly passing the bill through the full Assembly. Committee members were incensed a bill that didn't really exist was being rushed and asked if there would be another public airing before its final vote. The answer was 'no'.

The bill was numbered Assembly Bill 1 to signify its importance. Proponents explained the bill would force schools to be 'accountable'. Critics, and there were many, described the bill as 'stripping powers from locally elected school boards', using different tests for public and publically-funded private schools, reducing aid for every public school, and creating a board with power to decide if schools should be converted to privately run charter schools operated by a company headquartered in, say, Texas or California.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) testified there have been no fewer than 7 laws passed in the last 6 years requiring schools to test students and publically report performance. The DPI testified the bill would “trigger sanctions” on roughly one of every 8 state students and move about a sixth of state aid away from public schools.

A day before the “I Don’t Have A Clue” hearing, the Senate Education Reform Committee Chair released another version. This bill created 2 unelected, unaccountable boards to run schools – one housed in DPI; the other, for taxpayer funded private schools, housed in the Department of Administration (yes, they administer things, but schools aren’t yet on their list).

All this makes no sense unless you understand that private school interest groups, not good public policy, are driving the agenda. Some legislators try to appease the many private school groups. Instead, we should look at what research tells us about high-performing schools and how they got that way.

First, there is no consistent evidence that converting a public school to an independent charter school will produce superior results.

Second, top-performing schools got that way because of an investment. Across countries with well-performing schools, needy students and remote locations garnered more resources. Schools followed a rigorous curriculum; paid teachers and educated them well; tests were tied to the curriculum and measured critical thinking; and everyone – students, teachers and parents, took school seriously.

I spoke with a local school board member about the Assembly hearing. “I felt hopeful,” she told me. “There are so many grassroots groups all over the state and this [threat] could pull them together. We need community conversations about public schools. We need to start now and keep the conversation going.”

That’s good advice. We certainly don’t want our next generation waking up one day asking, “What happened to our local schools?” and hearing, “Guys, the body’s gone!”

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